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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

NOVEMBER

ALL THE LIES THAT ARE MY LIFE

A NEW NOVELLA BY

Harlan Ellison

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This is Harlan Ellison's first F&SF appearance since the special Ellison issue (July 1977), which included the Hugo and Nebula award-winner, "Jeffty Is Five." It might be described as fiction about science-fiction; it is the longest Ellison work we have ever published and the most intensely personal. It will be published as a limited edition illustrated hardcover from Underwood-Miller and as part of a collection to be published late this year by Houghton-Mifflin.

All the Lies That Are

BY
HARLAN ELLISON

They buried Jimmy Crowstairs today.

My closest, oldest, best friend: the world-famous fantasist, Kercher Oliver James Crowstairs.

They put him down the rectangular hole this morning, and I was one of the dozen people *inside* the black, plush velvet, upholstered ropes. Also in there among the select few was an ex-President of the United States, for whom I had not voted; also two actresses, one of whom, though age thirty, keeps being cast as late-teens beach-bait, despite her excellence as a serious thesp, mostly on the basis of her chubby cheeks and a pair of breasts—if you'll pardon the pragmatism—only slightly smaller than Bosnia and Herzegovina; the other one I didn't know, but she made a good impression on me when, as we were walking up the hill to the grave from the limos, she graciously waved off a small knot of ghouls seeking her autograph; Jimmy's publisher, whose chief claims to fame are his rejection of Jerzy Kosinski's first novel on the basis that it was morbid and depressing, and his ongoing participation as a panelist on a television game show now into its seventh year of syndication; Jimmy's sister, eight years his senior, whom he had not spoken to for over twenty years and to whom he referred as SylviaTheCunt, all one word; a great bear of an English

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My Life

novelist, a French film director who wore clothes so elegantly it made everyone else feel like breadline standbys, a plasma physicist from Princeton who's up for the Nobel this year because of his major breakthrough in magnetic containment fusion; and two married couples Jimmy considered close friends, mostly because they proved to him, as living examples, that it was possible for Man and Woman to live together under the same roof, bound by The Paper (as he constantly referred to it), without emotionally disemboweling each other. How many is that? Counting me, that's thirteen. Well, okay, thirteen, not twelve. Even so, it was a select cadre of mourners.

Set apart by black, plush velvet, upholstered ropes from the vast throng of his fans and idle groupies of the great, the near-great, the celebrated.

Jimmy's entourage numbered maybe two or three thousand. Not bad at all for a guy they steadfastly called a "sci-fi writer."

You'll notice *I* never use that hideous neologism.

Jimmy spent the last twenty-five years of his life trying to get that ugly categorization off his books and out of the biographies they wrote about him. He wrote fantasy, if specific pigeonholes are needed, but he insisted on being called simply a *writer*.

Either way, whatever they *called* him, he managed by sheer dint of hard work and careful manipulation of his public image to become three things, almost always mutually contradictory: a staggeringly wealthy bestselling novelist, a serious artist who was seriously regarded by all the "serious" critics, and a living legend in his own time. A household name like Salk or Babe Ruth or Hemingway—or Nixon or Jack the Ripper or Hitler.

And this morning they lowered him into darkness, and wonderful words were read over him by Rabbi Ashkenazi, Monsignor McCalla, Dr. Ehlen, Carl Sagan and me. Mine were the best.

Naturally: I knew him best. And as Jimmy so often told interviewers, with that abundance of humble largesse that so endeared him to *People* Magazine,

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The Paris Review and *The National Enquirer*, "Larry Bedloe is a good solid writer; he's got a nice little talent working there."

That popped up in my thoughts as I stood there watching them crank down the gunmetal-blue anodized-aluminum casket. Right across from me, on the other side of the black, plush velvet, upholstered ropes, was a chubby little woman in basic black and pearls. Her face was all puffy from crying. She was clutching the Literary Guild boxed set of his *Radimore* trilogy. Chances of her getting it autographed were very slim.

Kerch, as everyone but his ex-wife Leslie and I called him, was already on his way to stardom when I met him. We were both just turning twenty—I scampered ahead only six months older—which meant that for half of each year he could refer to me as "old man" and I could admonish him to speak with respect to his elders—and we had both been science fiction fans.

Every ingroup coterie has its mystiques, its craziness. Masons have secret handshakes; jazz musicians run a special patois incomprehensible to squares; antiquarian bookdealers share arcane rituals of buy & sell that bind them in terms of verso, recto, foxing, gutters and true firsts.

The deranged traditions of science fiction "fandom" are overwhelmingly attractive, particularly for those few boys and girls who are the outcasts of their high school classes because of wonky thought-processes, a flair for the bizarre, and physical appearance that denies them the treasures of sorority membership or a position on the football team. For the pimply, the short, the weird and intelligent...for those to whom sex is frightening and to whom come odd dreams in the middle of study hall, the camaraderie of fandom is a gleaming, beckoning Erewhon.

We had never met, though we'd corresponded heavily for several years: the nexus of our incipient friendship was the maelstrom of fannish publishing—"fanzines." Mimeographed amateur magazines of comment about the writers and the works in the genre, and a smattering of dreary fan fiction. His fanzine was titled, with becoming modesty, *The World's Greatest SF Fanzine Including Venus*; mine was called *Visitations*.

But it was at the tenth annual World Science Fiction Convention (neologized as ChiCon II), in Chicago, 1952, that we actually met.

I was walking through the lobby of the Hotel Morrison. Being short on funds, I had arranged to stay in a two-room suite with half a dozen other fans from different parts of the country; and I was looking for the one in whose name the rooms were registered, so I could get the key and dump my suitcase.

The lobby was jammed with a horde of fans checking in, renewing ac-

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quaintances, screaming across through the potted plants for directions, rolling in dollies with cartons of used books for the huckster room, making arrangements for cheeseburger dinners that night. And in the midst of that cyclical flow of sweaty aficionados who had driven or flown or hitchhiked or crawled in from Minneapolis and Kansas City and Cleveland, Jake Repnich tracked me down.

I felt a hand grab the back of my shirt as I tried to elbow through a knot of kids divvying up suitcases for the trek to the elevators, and I reeled backward as the tension was applied. Then someone clubbed me a shot in the kidney.

I pitched forward, but couldn't fall down because the back of my shirt was still wrapped in a fist. So my feet went out from under me and I dropped to my knees. I tried to look around behind me; I was in such exquisite pain that my head wouldn't turn on my neck. Everything seemed to be slipping off the edge. But I could tell from the expressions on the faces of the crowd that something awful was about to happen, and that I was on the visitation end of that unnamed awfulness.

A foot was planted between my shoulder blades and the fist let go of my shirt, and I was booted forward onto my suitcase, which slid a few feet, carrying me as on a raft.

I fell off, rolled over, and tried to sit up.

Conquest, Slaughter, Famine and Death were staring down at me.

The extended Fannish family had moved back to clear a circle in which I could be conveniently stomped to pudding. Erewhon had been invaded.

The nastiest looking of the Four Horsemen, whom I instantly recognized as Death, leaned forward, providing me with a dandy view of his terminal acne, and (in the pulp magazine vernacular of the period) lipped thinly, "I'm Jake Repnich, you little sonofabitch. You wanna tweak my nose?"

It became hideously clear what was happening. Six months earlier, among the batches of fanzines I traded for *Visitations* by mail, I'd received an ineptly hektographed crudzine called *Uranium-236*. It was "edited," if one takes semiliteracy, quadruple-amputee syntax and sophomoric screeds against any writer with aspirations of writing literature above the level of shootouts in space as editing, by one Jake Repnich. It came out of Secaucus, New Jersey. Need more be said?

As the voice of reason, I had cast caution to the Four Horsemen (without knowing it) and had responded to a particularly stupid article in which Repnich had said H.P. Lovecraft was a better writer than Poe, with the published remarks that good old Jake had about as much literary savvy as a storm drain and that someone ought to tweak his nose. The point being that merely slapping his pinkies wasn't due and proper for the intellectual crimes

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of a pimplebrain like good old Jake, a.k.a. Death.

Now Jake and three of his buddies, who no doubt spent their off-hours chewing broken glass and flogging cripples, had come all the way to Chicago from Secaucus, New Jersey, to more than tweak the nose of Larry Bedloe.

And I hadn't, at that point, lived enough of a life to have it flash before my eyes.

With three stories out to market, without even having had my shot at immortality, with the National Book Award and Martha Foley's *Best of the Year* and intimate conversations with Styron, Mailer and Hemingway and Steinbeck just within my grasp, I was about to become a problem for the carpet cleaners of the Hotel Morrison. *Quelle ironie!*

At which moment Jake Repnich's nose spouted blood and he went pinwheeling past me to land in a hideous heap against the check-in counter.

A foot and a half behind the spot he had just occupied stood a wild-eyed, babbling apparition, part vampire bat, part slavering derangement, part avenging Fury. The attache case he had used to break Death's nose was dangling from one of his little pixie fists. The other fist was balled and seemed to be waiting for a target of opportunity.

Feet planted far apart, this pint-sized Zorro, no less than Destiny's Tot, stared at the three remaining teddy boys with eyes that could have triggered an A-bomb. "You want trouble, you pustulent slugs? You want a hassle, huh? You want to come in here where law-abiding science fiction fans are trying to share good times, and start a fracas? That what you want? Well, we're ready! Right, *everybody?*"

He directed the challenge at the extended family, cowering in confusion and naked cowardice around the lobby.

From here and there in the crowd came timorous responses of "Yeah, you tell 'em," and "We're with you, all the way!"

In that instant I understood the dangerous power of Willie Stark, Elmer Gantry, Jean Paul Marat and Aimee Semple McPherson.

Gorgo the Small then instructed Conquest, Slaughter and Famine to gather up the weeping, bleeding carcass of their leader and, with the crowd backing him all the way, in some unfathomable power-pull, he moved the guerrilla band through the lobby, down the steps, across the landing, down some other steps, through the revolving doors, and out onto the street.

I was still on the floor.

Peter Pan reached down, pulled me to my feet and said, with a wide, infectious grin, "Hi, you're Larry Bedloe, right? I'm Kerch Crowstairs; we're sharing the room upstairs. I just sold my first novel; Crowell's publishing it in the spring; it's called *Death Dance on Sirius 7.* You're going to love it; I promise you."

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Say hello to Kercher O.J. Crowstairs.

It started raining as the funeral party filed away from Jimmy's grave. I looked up into the slanting gray downpour. Since I was still inside the black, plush velvet, upholstered ropes the attendants let me remain for a moment.

Almost thirty years. I knew you through most of my life, Jimmy. Friends. I don't even know what that means. I'm sure you must have done things for me on the basis of friendship, but I'll be damned if I can remember a single one of them. I remember another time of rain, a night in New York, when we had dinner together and you left me standing in the wet outside the restaurant, I remember that. You hustled down the sidewalk and popped into your Porsche and drove off uptown, never even thinking to offer me a ride back to my hotel. It took me the better part of an hour to get a cab; I remember that.

But friends. Never occurred to me to question that word as the operative definition of our liaison. But what the hell did that ever *mean*, functionally speaking? You knew almost everything about me, and I knew quite a lot about you, but then so do *all* your readers, what with the confessional nature of most of what you wrote.

I was one of your readers. Every word published that I could lay hands on.

Which is more than we can say for the reverse, eh, Kerch?

You read "The Hourglass" ten years ago, chum, and made a point of mentioning how good it was every time we got together. I wrote that *ten years ago*, Jimmy! Nine books since. But by the mute testimony of your failure to mention even one of them, old friend now gone, you told me that it had all been downhill. Ten years ago, Jimmy. That was *it* right? The one high spot and then nothing but mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, right? Too controlled, that's what you used to tell me on the nights when we'd sit across from each other at the kitchen table, when we'd sit and drink instant and reminisce. Too controlled, too cautious. There wasn't enough wildness in what I put on the paper. Right? Right.

You had enough wildness for both of us, Jimmy.

I'd stamped muddy spots around my feet. The tops of my shoes were covered. And I looked across the grave, through the rain that was coming down cold and nasty, and Jimmy's ex-wife Leslie was staring at me. She'd cried so much her nose had swollen and closed both eyes to slits. She held her head to the side like a little girl who's seen her dolly run over by a car. I couldn't hear the short, sharp thistles of her sobs, but those Audrey Hepburn shoulders went up and down, each intake of breath painful.

You had enough wildness for both of us, Jimmy.

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I walked around the grave and stepped over the black, plush velvet, upholstered rope and scuffed through the pedicured grass to her. She could barely see me, but she knew who it was. We knew how each of us moved, even in the darkness.

I took her in my arms and she buried her face in the hollow of my shoulder. Her dress was soaked through and she was cold, heaving with the sobs but not shivering. The weather report had said nothing about rain.

Every few years I was privileged to hold her like this. Usually she was crying. We fitted together, in this way, like ancient stones.

"Come on, love," I said, over her head, into the rain. "It's all done now. We've got to go put a lid on it."

The last of the limousines was waiting, and we let the chauffeur hold the door for us, and we got in and went off to Jimmy's baronial mansion to hear the reading of the will.

And Kerch, left behind in the rain, went with us.

Jimmy had been having simultaneous affairs with four women, any one of whom would have been sufficiently daunting to scare even Vlad the Impaler into impotence. One was an Olympic gymnast, no more than twenty years old, a coltish, natural blonde, much given to scenes in restaurants where the *maitre d'* objected to her carrying a coatimundi on her shoulder. Her name was Muriel. One was an authority on machine intelligence, in her early thirties, with what used to be referred to as "bee-stung" lips, a mass of heavy, thick black, lustrous hair the shade of thoughts for which one can be jailed without bail, and an intellect that made virtually everything she said incomprehensible to all but five or six of the finest minds on the planet. Her name was Andrea. One was a Cuban actress who had fled her country mere hours before an order for her arrest on grounds of moral turpitude was issued. Not yet thirty, in appearance no more than twenty-five, she claimed to be Chicana, Puerto Rican, Venezuelan or Castilian, depending on what the casting director was seeking, with a pair of legs usually referred to as "terminating just under her chin," with a voice and range that could have shamed Yma Sumac, and a temper that frequently manifested itself in a splendid right cross. Her name was Edith. One was a consumer advocate for CBS television, a former runner-up to Miss North Carolina in the Miss America contest, thirty years old, rather puckishly-committed to a variation on the original Ann-Margret coiffure which, given all proper due, admirably suited her auburn hair, opinionated, contentious and directly responsible for a Xerox price rollback that had cost the firm nearly a quarter of a million dollars. Her name was Mary Louise.

I had been seeing Leslie for three years.

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Not until six years after they'd married did Jimmy bother to ask if I'd been troubled by the heat-death of the universe. Simply never occurred to him to worry about it. Not that he was bone-stick-stone insensitive; no indeed: it was that he moved too fast for consideration of the emotional debacles at any given point along the scenic route.

They were living in Connecticut, near Crown Point, in a stately manse brought over from Thomas Hardy country, somewhere near Dorset, brick-by-brick, in the early 1900's. It was one of those fumed oak, parquet-floored, wine-cellared beauties all writers dream about owning; just the right setting when one receives the word that one has been awarded a Nobel, or a Pulitzer, or an American Book Award, or a high six-figure purchase offer from Paramount. Two, and almost three, of those came to Jimmy in his stately manse. I was writing a lot of book reviews for *The Village Voice* and Kirkus.

He called late in the afternoon; the last spear of light, permitted entrance by the surrounding buildings, had almost vanished from the airshaft; and I sat in gloomy relaxation trying to decipher the Mayan Codex that Doubleday charmingly called a royalty statement.

"What're you up to?" he said, without identifying himself.

"I'm locked in non-orgasmic congress with Doubledays' bookkeepers."

"How about dinner?"

"When, tonight?"

"Yeah. I'm in the city. You free?"

"According to my royalty statements, that's exactly what I am."

"The new book isn't doing well?"

"How could it? They must have taken the entire printing, loaded it on barges, floated it out the Narrows and deep-sixed it. Weighted down, no doubt, by the excess profits from their latest bestselling cookbook."

"You don't sound like the man to cheer me up tonight."

"Sure I am. You can spend my last exuberant evening with me before I establish residency in the nearest leper colony."

"That would be the Carrville Leprosarium. In Louisiana. And they don't call it leprosy any more. Hansen's disease."

"Why aren't I grateful for that information?"

Badinage. Brightalk. Never a discouraging word, and the deer and the antelope play. The ritual incantations of those who had resonated to Salinger. I still had my red baseball cap in the bottom of a carton of old clothes, at the back of the bedroom closet. Nostalgia somehow cannot survive the smell of mothballs.

"I'm here; come on over whenever you're free."

"About an hour. We'll go have a steak. I'm paying."

I smiled. Naturally, you're paying. With a five thousand copy print-run of

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Laurence Bedloe's most recent astonishment, *The Salamander Enchantment*, rapidly being carried by salutary sea-currents toward the Bermuda Triangle, naturally you're paying for steaks. Now if you're up for Twinkies and Hawaiian Punch, I'm paying.

After a while the doorbell buzzed and I put on some lights and let him in. He had the look of a man who has broken some vows.

"I need a drink," he said. He fell into the rocker with the leather seat, toed off his loafers, and sank down onto his spine, eyes closed. "By the unspeakable name of the slavering hordes of Yog-Sothoth, though Allah be the wiser...I do fiercely need a drink."

"Can be done, chum. Give it a speakable name and I'll put it in your paw in moments."

He rubbed his closed eyes ferociously. From inside his hands he mumbled, "Any damn thing. Largeish, if you will."

I went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard and gave the cognac a pass. This looked like heavy-weather drinking. I poured Wild Turkey into a big water glass without benefit of jigger, tossed in a single ice cube, raised the level with a little tap water, and carried the Bomber's Moon back into the living room.

Jimmy was sitting on the floor, in the darkness near the window. I couldn't see him that well, but I could hear him sobbing. I think I grabbed for the doorjamb to steady myself. In the fifteen years we'd been friends, I'd never seen him cry. I'd never known him to cry. I'd never heard anyone mention that they'd seen him cry. I didn't even know if he was *able* to cry.

He didn't know I was there, staring at him.

Very quietly, I carried the glass over to him, set it down beside his crossed legs, and I went back across the room and sat just outside a pool of lamplight, my face in darkness. I had no idea what to do, didn't want to say something wrong, so I waited. Eventually, it seemed to me, he'd stop, take a drink, and we'd talk.

Eventually he stopped, noticed the glass, reached for it slowly and drank long and deep, and then he looked around for me.

"Here's a new one for you," he said.

I spoke softly. "Not so new; I do it all the time."

A marvelous waiting silence resumed.

Quite a while later he said, "I never asked you: were you pissed off at me for marrying Leslie?"

I thought about the right answer. Not necessarily the kindest answer, or the most politic answer, or the truthful answer; just the right one. "I think we were about done with each other."

More silence. He finished the drink, I went in and threw a lot of cubes in a mixing bowl, brought the bowl and the bottle, and set them down in front of

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him. He worked at it slowly. Neither of us would end up alcoholics: we weren't passionate enough about the juice.

"You know, I've always felt like your kid brother."

"It's only six months, Jimmy."

"Always felt faintly ridiculous around you. Loudmouthed, gauche, coming on too strong even when I was purposely speaking so softly I knew people had to strain to hear me."

"It's only six months, Jimmy."

"You know I'm a better writer than you, don't you? Not just sales...*better*. There's heat in my stuff; it works, it pulls the plow. *Better*.

"For Christ's sake, Larry, there's nothing but cold dead air blowing through your books. They ought to hand out woolly mittens with every copy of your stuff."

"Six months, Jimmy; just six months."

He started crying again. "For Christ's sake, Larry, *help* me! You've got it all together, you've got the answer, you've *always* had the answers. I don't know whether I'm coming or going, I'm falling apart. I feel like I'm being emptied out, like a hot water bottle; it's all running away from me. I'm going to kill somebody, I swear to God I'm going to run through the streets killing strangers."

"How about some gin rummy, tenth of a cent a point?"

He got up, went into the bathroom and washed his face.

When he came back he sat down in the rocker, looking bushed. "You ready to talk about it now?" I asked.

He stretched his hands out on the arms of the rocker until the fingertips were just at the edge. Just at the edge. "This open marriage with Leslie is killing me. I can't stand it."

It was the first I'd heard of it. When he married her I stopped thinking about anything in that area. I never knew what went on with them in that way. I felt my stomach getting cold. That's the way I respond to photographs of Dachau.

"So get out of it," I said.

What I *wanted* to say was: come off it, Jimmy! You've got exactly and precisely what you always wanted. You're rich, you're well-liked, you're urbane and charming; you've got a beautiful, intelligent wife, a big classy home steeped in authentic antiquity; everywhere you go they know you, your face is on the tube and they don't hold you for the last fifteen minutes of the Carson Show; you go where you want, do what you want, you're a workaholic under the weight of the Puritan Work Ethic, so you get off on slaving night and day....

You're who you made you, Jimmy; so come off it.

Wanted to say that. But didn't. Sat there and said, "Go ahead, tell me what's happening." Remember when you were a kid, how awful it was when you bit down on the tinfoil?

And he went on for about two

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hours, telling me everything about his life, and Leslie's life, and my life, and about how dear I was to him because I was his role-model. All of this went in and flowed out again, and I must confess there were even three or four things that disgusted me.

And then we went out to O. Henry's Steak House and had magisterial chunks off some King of the Beasts, and I put ketchup on mine and Kercher Oliver James Crowstairs, the bestselling and critically acclaimed author winced and said, "That's disgusting, Larry."

And I said: "Chalk it up to improper toilet training."

Jimmy's baronial mansion was not the one in which he'd lived with Leslie. That had been Connecticut. This was Los Angeles. The Crown Point mansion had been brought over stone-by-stone from Dorset. This one looked as if it had been brought over ticky-by-tacky from the back lot at Twentieth.

But it had a "library." Yes, indeed, it had a library that held the 37,000 books Jimmy had owned at the moment of his death. He read a book a day, bright or cloudy.

And we gathered there, in the high-arched library, for the reading of the will, the last will and testament of Jimmy, beloved Kerch, American literary treasure.

It was not what I expected.

The room had been set up with deep, comfortable chairs, all facing an enormous beam-television screen. The projector was hooked up with a Sony Betamax unit. An impish-looking man of middle height, wearing what was clearly a very expensive three-piece suit that had not been properly tailored to the slump of his shoulders, stood before the screen holding a document that was very likely the last hurrah of my friend Jimmy Crowstairs.

Despite the serious manner of the imp in the three-piece suit, intended I suppose to give the occasion the proper portentous ambiance, it was impossible to get away from a festive feeling in that room. Jimmy had been an inveterate collector—of everything. The library was floor-to-ceiling with books, arranged alphabetically by author, from Aeschylus, Aldiss and Algren at the left of the topmost shelf of the first bookcase to the left side of the entranceway...to Zamyatin, Zelazny and Zola at the bottom of the last bookcase all the way around the enormous room. But there were glass cases spotted across the room, containing pewter figurines, Makundi sculpture from Mozambique, laquered boxes from Russia, T'ang dynasty glazes, scrimshaw from whaling villages in New England, Amerindian pottery, German kinetic sculptures flickering and strobing, ceramic statues from the Austrian courts, fantasy bronzes by Enzenbacher, Spacher and Rumph; and lucite easels with paintings: Kanemitsu, Stamitz, Pebworth, David

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Hockney, the Dillons, Wunderlich, Bash, Wyeth, Rothko, Kley, Campanile and Willardson. And in the dead center of the room was a nine-foot-tall model of the Abominable Snowman that Steve Kirk had designed for the Matterhorn at Disneyland.

No matter how hard the imp in the three-piece suit worked at it, he could not possibly overcome the lunatic frivolity of that *yeti.*

The five chairs were arranged in a semicircle. At the extreme left, already seated, Jimmy's sister SylviaTheCunt stared straight ahead, folding and refolding the telegram that had commanded her appearance here. The next chair was empty. And the next chair. In the fourth chair sat Jimmy's friend Bran Winslow, himself a writer, and probably the gentlest human being I'd ever met. He had not been at the burial ceremony. In the last chair, at the extreme right, sat Missy, which was short for Mississippi, who was—and for the past fifteen years had been—Jimmy's assistant, good right hand, troubleshooter, basic office staff and Person Friday. She let no one call her a "girl," even if the word Friday followed it.

Obviously the two empty chairs were for Leslie and me.

We moved toward the chairs and started to sit down, but the imp stopped us, saying, "Mrs. Crowstairs, would you take the third seat please; Mr. Bedloe, Kerch wanted you to sit in the second seat." We rearranged ourselves. It made good sense: I separated Leslie and SylviaTheCunt, who looked on each other with the enthusiasm one might evince at the prospect of root-canal surgery.

The imp waited till we were settled; then he said, "My name is Kenneth L. Gross; I was the attorney for Kercher Oliver James Crowstairs and remain legal counsel for both his estate and The Kerch Corporation, in which Mr. Crowstairs was the principal party of record."

He showed us the document we had all come to hear.

"This document is Mr. Crowstairs's last will and testament, as you might have supposed. However, it will not be read here today."

Why had I suspected Jimmy wasn't finished with us yet?

He waited a moment for the effect, then went on. "Mr. Crowstairs, as you all know, was a rather remarkable man, with a flair for the original. One day, several years ago, we were discussing the preparation of this document, and I mentioned, almost as a joke, that he ought to videotape the reading of his will. Kerch...Mr. Crowstairs immediately fastened on the idea and instructed me to look into the legal ramifications of such a videotaping.

"At first there were questions of validity, but Mr. Crowstairs financed the appropriate research, and in a decision handed down just eight months ago by the Supreme Court of the State of California, such a procedure was

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adjudged permissible, contingent on a written document being prepared, as it has been historically.

"Many of the smaller grants in this document will be handled directly through my office, but the principal beneficiaries are gathered here, per Mr. Crowstairs' instructions, and you will now hear your bequests directly from the deceased. This extended element of the basic instrument was videotaped four months ago...before any of us had any idea...we never thought...."

He faltered to silence. I liked him a lot. He had cared about Jimmy.

Then he went behind us and turned on the television set from the projection module, cut in the Betamax, light appeared on the enormous screen, color-bands of leader ran through, and suddenly we were looking at this room, with Jimmy, the attorney, Missy, a tall, thin black woman I didn't recognize, and Bran Winslow, sitting at Jimmy's desk. It was obvious that Missy, the black woman and Bran Winslow were the witnesses to the execution of the will, and I now understood how two people as close to Jimmy as Missy and Bran had been, who had been there only a few months before when this document had been merely an act of preparing for the long, far inevitable future, had chosen not to attend the burial service.

They all sat up there, larger than life, on the screen, and I thought with the faintest flutter of trepidation, *What a field day the archivists will have with this litle chunk of literary gossip. Roll 'em, C.B. It's magic time,* I thought. *Break a leg, Jimmy.*

He once took me along with him on what he called a "dangerous mission of research."

Because of the confessional nature of much of what he wrote—Jimmy had believed Hemingway when Poppa said, "a writer should never write what he doesn't know"—Kerch was forever putting himself in crazy situations where raw material for books had to be obtained first-hand, usually at risk of one's life or sanity.

He had scaled mountains, raced sports cars, worked in a steel foundry, traveled cross-country on a Vincent Black Shadow with Hell's Angels, marched with Chavez in the Coachella Valley, spent time in Southern jails for civil rights activities, chummed it up with a Mafia *capo*, managed to con a trio of radical feminist lesbians into a four-way sexual liaison, covered a South American revolution, hired himself out to a firm specializing in industrial espionage, and God knows what all else.

And once he took me with him.

I was living in Chicago at the time, doing editorial work on a men's magazine. He called and asked if I was free that night, and if I was free would I like to accompany him on a "dangerous mission of research."

Evenings spent in Jimmy's com-

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pany were many things, but they were seldom dull or uneventful. I said I was stoked for an adventure.

He picked me up in a Hertz rental at the office, and all he would say was that we were going deep into the South Side of the city, the section commonly known as Back of the Yards. Oh, yes, he said one more thing: he was going to see a woman who had given him a case of the crabs.

I think I responded with the remark, "Frankly, I'm underwhelmed."

But when we got there—*there* being a rundown tenement in a scuzzy section—I found an apartment half-filled with card-carrying criminals. Eleven of them, looking like road-company understudies for "The Wolf Man," starring Madame Maria Ouspenskaya.

Four flights up, in what would have been called a railroad flat, had we been in New York and not Chicago, they sat around the kitchen staring at Jimmy and me with dark, hooded eyes. I felt like a cobra at a mongoose rally.

Jimmy had knocked at the apartment door in a special cadence, and the door was opened by an extremely attractive young woman, who threw her arms around him and kissed him full on the mouth. I stared beyond them, into the kitchen, and was greeted by the massed nastiness contained in ten pairs of dark, hooded eyes.

He held her away from him and murmured something too quietly for the gypsies to hear. What he said, Jimmy always the romantic, was: "What're you pushing this time...cancer?"

She grinned and gave him a playful punch in the stomach...playful enough to straighten him out with a whooze of pain. Then she led him into the apartment. I followed, not happily.

Let me cut through all the subsequent hours of weird happenings. The background was this:

Jimmy had been out on the lecture circuit the year before. In Kansas City the usual gaggle of sycophants who cannot differentiate between the Artist and the Art rushed the podium for autographs and cheap thrills such as the pressing of flesh. In the crowd had been an extremely attractive young woman who, when her turn came to thrust a book and a pen under Jimmy's nose, had thrust neither. She had moved in quickly and thrust *herself*. Reaching for him, she had put her mouth to his ear and whispered, "Why don't we go back up to your hotel room and see if you can make me groan."

Needless to say....

About a week later, Jimmy back home, a phone call on his private line. It was the extremely attractive young woman whom Jimmy had made groan. Her name, she told him, was not Mia, as she had told him. She was not, strictly speaking, a bank teller, as she had told him. She was, in fact, a member of a rather large family that specialized in robbing banks. When

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they were between jobs, she worked as a bank teller. "Who better?" Jimmy had replied to that one. She was on the dodge, spent most of her time underground with different aliases and different pseudo-lives, and she had had a wonderful time with Jimmy whose books, during those long hours underground, had brought her endless pleasure.

When Jimmy inquired why she was revealing all this to him, she shamefacedly admitted—though he couldn't see her face—that she had probably given him a cataclysmic dose of the crabs.

Without even bothering to check, Jimmy perceived that he had, at last, an understanding of why he had been scratching furiously for the preceding week. Ever the polite chap, he had thanked her decently for taking the time to call on such a piddling matter when she obviously had bigger problems to worry about. Then he hung up the phone, sent Missy to the pharmacy to buy copious quantities of A-200 Pyrinate Liquid, Cuprex, Kwell cream *and* Kwell lotion—and a thermite bomb in the event a scorched earth policy proved necessary.

Now a year later, the Mia-*manqué* had summoned Jimmy from California to Chicago to act as intermediary in the family's surrender to the Laws (as she called them, reminiscent of the colorful patois of Bonnie & Clyde).

And this once he had taken me with him.

Pseudo-Mia took him by the hand and started to lead him down the hallway toward the rear of the apartment. "Hey!" I said. The sound made by a ferret caught in a clamp-jaw trap.

Jimmy turned, still being led by the hand, walked backward and said, "Make yourself at home. Strike up new acquaintances. I'll be back."

And Not-Mia opened a door to what I presumed was a a bedroom off the hall —thereby illuminating her family's liberal, one might even say cavalier, attitude toward her sexual egalitarianism; and she disappeared inside; followed by Jimmy's disappearing hand, arm, body, and face, leaving behind only the smile of the Cheshire Cat.

I turned to stare at ten pairs of dark, hooded eyes that were staring at me.

A man in his thirties got up, stood aside, and indicated the empty chair at the table. I sat down, not happily.

At almost the instant I realized there was a wonderful, dark brown smell of something baking in the apartment, the old woman—an old *old* woman, shapeless and infinitely corrugated with wrinkles—sitting directly across from me reached behind her, wearing a potholder mitt, opened the door of the oven, pulled out a metal bread pan, and slapped it down on the table between us.

"Langos," she said. She pronounced it *lahng*-osh.

It smelled sensational. Some kind

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of deep-fried bread dough. I looked at it. The guy who had given me his seat took a bowl full of garlic cloves off the sink and put it down in front of me.

"Bread," he said. "Rub it with the garlic."

I reached in, took a piece of *langos*, burned my fingertips, squeaked, provoked ten smiles, added an eleventh, my own, and rubbed the hot surface with garlic. It tasted sensational.

Then the old, old woman began rattling off at me. She spoke uninterruptedly for about a minute. In Hungarian. I smiled. I nodded. She stopped and looked at me, waiting for a response.

A man in his fifties, sitting to my left, said, "She asks if you know if Laurie will marry Vic Lamont and if Cookie will go crazy and will Simon Jessup kill Orin Hillyer?"

I stopped chewing. I smiled. I nodded. I looked from one to another of them, hoping someone would take pity on a man lost in the desert.

The old, old woman, hearing what the man in his fifties had said, added a few more words. I looked at the interpreter. He spoke resignedly: "And will Adam Drake fall in love with Nicole?"

"I'm sorry," I said slowly, "but I don't know what she's talking about." I smiled. I nodded.

There was an appreciable drop in temperature around the table. The man in his fifties said something short to the old, old woman. She snorted that special snort translatable in *any* language as, "Who asked for you, who sent for you; who sent for you, who asked for you?"

And so I sat there for the better part of an hour. In Indonesia they have a name for it: *djam karet*...the hour that stretches.

Eventually, treaties having apparently been openly entered into, Other-Than-Mia and Jimmy emerged from the bedroom. It looked like a draw.

Jimmy leaned in and said, "You know the FBI's list of Ten Most Wanted?"

I nodded. Not happily.

"They just made it to number one."

"Terrific. I'll meet you in the car; say my goodbyes for me."

"Shut up and listen.

"It's a hype. It's a publicity dodge. They never put *anyone* on that list till a week or two before they're going to make an arrest. That way they spread it around about all these dangerous felons at large, and a week or so later the Bureau makes a pinch, making it look as if they're right on top of things. People they *can't* find never even get *on* the list."

"You're telling me Jimmy Stewart's going to break in here any minute with a Thompson submachine gun, is that it?"

"I'm telling you they want to give themselves up; but they're afraid they'll get wiped out if they just wait for the feds to find them."

"Why don't they run? God knows

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they're in practice."

"Shut up and listen.

"They want me to be the go-between. To get the press and some responsible local officials in here before they pull the plug."

"Listen, Jimmy...they pull the plug and you're liable to lose the baby with the bathwater. I'm referring to *me* baby, in case you had any doubts..."

"Take it easy. I did a docudrama about a Chicago psychiatrist for CBS last year..."

The background babble was growing louder. The old, old woman was now silent, watching and listening. The thirty-year-old guy and the fifty-year-old guy were obviously on opposite sides of the question—whatever the question *was*—and I could see the crowd was about evenly divided. The older guy was with Mia, whatever she was proposing, and I had the certain feeling that if the thirty-year-old guy's point of view prevailed, that this baby might go down the drain *before* Jimmy Stewart made one of his rare personal appearances.

"Marvin Ziporyn is his name...the psychiatrist. He's the top shrink for the state. Works with the Cook County authorities. Concert violinist, big social mover, wrote a couple of books; he's got access to Kup and the mayor and everybody else."

I was staring openly now. Hell, anybody could get to the mayor; but access to Irv Kupcinet, the columnist; well, that was the Big Time.

"So?"

"So I call Marvin, tell him what I'm into, get him to contact Kup, who'll love it a lot. They pull in a few of the local squires and top cossacks...and Mia and the crowd remand themselves into proper custody."

"Before Jimmy Stewart breaks in...."

"Right, right."

"I'll meet you at the car. Thank the old lady for the bread." I started toward the door. The thirty-year-old guy erupted from his seat, and if there was anything else in that lousy kitchen but the gigantic .45 in his hairy paw, I didn't see it. There is a quality about blue-steel gunmetal that gathers all light in a room; like a black diamond.

He was pointing it at me.

I grinned stupidly, placed both palms against the air and tittered like the village idiot. He seemed somewhat mollified and the barrel of the automatic lowered. To the vicinity of my crotch.

"Damn it, Larry, stop acting like a schmuck. Let Mia handle it."

"Her name isn't Mia."

"*Whatever* her name is; let her handle it."

So I stood there with him, leaning against the wall, for the better part of an hour while the Sanhedrin decided my fate.

Sometime during that hour I asked him, "Who's Vic Lamont?"

He said, "Never heard of him."

I said, "Will Laurie marry him?"

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He said, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

I said, "Will Laurie marry Vic Lamont; will Cookie go crazy; will Simon Somebody-or-other kill Orin Hillyer; will Adam Something-or-other fall in love with Nicole?"

He stared at me.

"The old lady seemed miffed I didn't know the answers," I whispered.

He thought about it a minute. Then he said, "*The Edge of Night*. It's a soap opera."

I said, "Why me?"

He said, "Because you're with me, and Mia told them I'm a famous television writer, and that means you're a famous television writer, and that means you know what happens to all those characters in the soap operas, because they're not characters, they're real people, and I suppose when you're on the lam the only consistency in your life is the surrogate life of people in soap operas. What'd you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her anything. I didn't have the faintest idea what she was talking about."

He said, "How'd she take it?"

I said, "Not terrific."

He nodded, thought about it a minute, then called Mia over. He took her aside, whispered at her for a little while, then sent her back to the table. She bent down over the old, old woman, whispered in her ear for a while longer, and when she straightened up the old, old woman was grinning wide as a death's-head. Shecame over to us, and said, "All set. Do your stuff, Kerch."

He gave her a little kiss and started toward the old black two-handed pedestal telephone on the kitchen counter. I asked the Memory of Mia, "What's all set?"

She patted me on the cheek and answered, "They're not going to cut you into small pieces and leave you in garbage cans all over the South Side." Then she went away, to join my best friend, Kercher Oliver James Crowstairs, who had brought me along into the jaws of death on a "dangerous mission of research."

It was not till a week later, after the gypsy bank robbers had given themselves up with attendant headlines and photos of Jimmy leading them out of the tenement into the waiting arms of Irv Kupcinet, the Mayor of Chicago and the bureau chief of the Midwest Regional FBI office (not to mention several thousand cops and G-Men armed for the apocalypse), that Kerch bothered to tell me that what had saved our lives was Mia's imparting to her dear old Granny the information that I was a close family friend of everyone on *The Edge of Night* and that when (or if) Granny ever got sprung from the federal slam, I would introduce her to Laurie, Vic Lamont, Simon Jessup, Orin Hillyer, Cookie, Nicole and Adam Drake, *whoever* the hell they were!

* * *

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My name is Kercher O.J. Crowstairs," said the Kercher O.J. Crowstairs three times life-size on the screen before us. The camera pulled back into a medium shot, and Jimmy up there whipped open the wallet lying on the desk. He pulled out a sheaf of cards and held the first one up to the camera, which obligingly zoomed in for a close-up. Jimmy's voice, off-camera, said, "And this is my driver's license, issued by the state of California. You'll notice it has a rather unflattering photograph of me right here in the lower left-hand corner, which will identify me as the one and only K.O.J. Crowstairs, your friendly neighborhood testator.

"Look: we're doing this videotape so no one, and that means *no one* will be able to raise the question of my competency after I've croaked. By competency they mean was I of sound mind and body, and under no duress, such as being held captive by the Symbionese Liberation Army. But if I played it absolutely straight and didn't laugh at all this somber bullshit, then anyone who's known me more than ten minutes would suspect I *was* out of my skull.

"Nonetheless..." and he said this hurriedly, because Kenneth Gross, the attorney, was making the kind of strangling noises that, had he uttered them in a good restaurant, would have brought the *maitre d'* running to administer the Heimlich Maneuver, "nonetheless, moving right along to the serious stuff, folks, here's my friend and advisor, the world-famous corporate attorney, Mr. Kenneth L. Gross, who'd like to say a few words. Let's give him a big funeral-day welcome...*Kenny Gross!*"

The attorney was the color of old toothpaste as he read from a prepared form. "Mr. Crowstairs, you have now established your identity for those who may be seeing this recording at a later date. You have retained this office in connection with estate planning and more specifically to prepare your will. The document I now show you (handing will to client), is the final draft of the will. Would you please take a moment to review it?"

The screen now went to split-frame, the right side being a copy of the will. Jimmy took the document Gross handed him and scanned it. "But this is a laundry list, Kenny." The attorney damned near fainted. Jimmy laughed and hurriedly corrected himself. "I'm *kidding*, I'm just kidding; this is my will; honest to God, I swear it is!"

Gross was breathing hard. I felt for the poor devil. "Is this the document that you have previously read?"

"It is, it is! Nag, nag, nag."

Gross bulled on forward. Not happily. "Are you executing this document or prepared to execute this document...no, wait...I'm out of sequence! Damn it, Kerch!"

Jimmy grinned infectiously. He was never happier than when he was stir-

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ring up the soup. He laid a placating hand on Gross's. "Take it easy, Kenny. Don't fumfuh."

Gross swallowed; as they say, he looked daggers at his client, pulled a weathered pipe with a large Oom Paul bowl and a bent stem from his vest pocket, puffed it alight with a kitchen match taken from his *other* vest pocket, harrumphed once, and began again.

"All right, then: In my presence, and in the presence of these witnesses, and cognizant of the fact that these proceedings are being videotaped, does this document reflect your exclusive and entire wishes with regard to the disposition of your property?"

Testator responded in the affirmative: "I respond in the affirmative."

The attorney now turned to the three witnesses. "Each of you has known Mr. Crowstairs for many years. You have been asked to participate in these proceedings for the purpose of further identification. Will you now, each in turn, declare who you are, your relationship to Mr. Crowstairs, and verify that this is, in fact, Mr. Kercher Oliver James Crowstairs."

Camera came in to close-up on the first witness as the split-screen went to solo image.

"My name is Brandon Winslow; I have been a close personal friend, house guest and sometime-collaborator of Kercher Crowstairs for almost fourteen years; and I hereby declare that the man over there is, in fact and as he's stated, the Crowstairs he says he is."

Well, well, I thought, *oh my ears and whiskers.*

"Sometime-collaborator." Now there's one phrase I never thought I'd hear in connection with Jimmy. So Bran had been paying off the loans and the live-in companionship with something more valuable than coin of the realm. He had worked on some of the books. That went a long way toward explaining how Jimmy could turn out his novel *and* a short-story collection every year as regular as the swallows visiting Capistrano, plus finding the time for all the introductions, newspaper columns, background pieces for *TV Guide;* the lectures, the television talk-show appearances, the writing workshops; and the women. He had another laborer in the vineyard. A bond slave.

I cast back through the long list of Crowstairs publications trying to figure out which ones had been co-written—*entirely ghost-written?!?!*—no, it was unthinkable—but then, *collaboration* had been unthinkable till Bran had let the black cat cross the path —and I came up with two immediately.

Bakelite Radio Fantasies and *Fearsome Noises.* They were gentler, more thoughtful than was Jimmy's wont. There was greater lyricism in them, closer in tone to Bran's own solo novel —his *only* novel—*Knowledge of Two*

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Kinds. They were two of my favorite Crowstairs creations.

And my heart contracted in my chest as I realized that in some way Bran Winslow had sold himself to Jimmy, had denied his own career, to add a few more chapters to the myth of Kercher Crowstairs. I didn't want to know what Jimmy had had on Bran, that could make him, seemingly willingly, put aside his own work, to become a secret shadow of the public Kerch.

To me, it was unthinkable. The more I thought about it, the more often the word *unthinkable* burned in the darkness. Unthinkable: Jimmy was many kinds of man, but blackmailer wasn't one of them. Unthinkable: Brandon Winslow was as fiercely commited to his art as was I, as was Jimmy....

Unthinkable!

No one has that kind of charisma. I simply wouldn't go for it. There had to be something deeper, something more potent. It was unthinkable that a writer of Bran Winslow's sincerity and dedication would simply give over his life to Jimmy; it was unthinkable that Jimmy's fever could be passed on to another writer—possibly a *better* writer, a more important writer, an intrinsically more valuable, a *worthier* writer—to cause him to deny the song of his own Muse. But now that I'd thought it, as unthinkable as it had seemed....

Oh, Jesus, Jimmy, this is most hateful; and I don't even know what was behind it.

Poor Bran.

Damn! Stop that! Stop thinking that way. There was a reason, a solid, good reason. There had to be. No writer can do that to another writer who knows how good he is, who has the books in him crying out to be released. No one. No, damn you, *no one!*

My head was swimming. I felt sick to my stomach.

"Can you hold the tape," I heard myself saying; and then as the film vanished and white screen appeared, I bolted out of my chair and rushed for the toilet.

I should have locked the door. But the bile was pushing as if it was spring-loaded; I barely had time to get into the can before I felt it coming like the Sunshine Express. Down on my knees, loving the toilet bowl, and then the river of fire.

Leslie was in there, right behind me, trying to hold my forehead, *for Christ's consumptive sake*. I shoved at her, ineffectually, as she continued to play Lady Bountiful to my bounty.

I flailed my free arm behind me, trying to get her to *back off*. I think in that moment I realized just how insensitive she is. There'd always been hints...such as her revelation at a group dinner many years before that she had, as a child, thrown a hamster into a window fan...and then, of

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course, she'd stayed married to Jimmy; that had to indicate more than a *soupcon* of the obdurate.

But the level of insensitivity it takes to force someone in the most degrading condition known to humanity, to think that he's being *watched* while he glops up his guts, no matter if it's misguidedly interpreted as "concern" or "out of love," is a bestial level whereon one finds only flagstones or spent shell casings. *Back off!*

After a while I got up, filled the sink with cold water, put my face into it completely, and lay there for quite a length of time. My eyes were burning.

I emptied the bowl, washed thoroughly, gargled as best I could with icy water, and reached for a towel. Leslie was standing there with one in her outstretched hand.

I took it. "Thank you very much."

"How do you feel?"

"Dandy. Just dandy."

"That was awful."

I looked a surprised look. "Oh, really? It usually brings down the house."

"My God," she said, "you know you're even starting to *talk* like him?"

Have you never perceived that before, my love? Have you never caught on that my interior monologues are *never* in my own voice, never the way *I* write or speak? They are pure Jimmy. That quicksilver turn of the phrase, all that heat and color; not the plodding, methodical, reasonably reasoned wise uncle with good, solid thinking of Laurence Bedloe, but rather the bold, sure spring of the tiger, and I believe in you. Never caught that, eh?

"The hamster isn't the *most* awful I've ever heard," I said, "although it *is* in the top tenth of a percentile of the most awful."

"What are you *talk*ing about? Are you okay?"

"The *most* awful, I guess, was something Missy told me. She said that when she was a kid Down South they used to take baby ducks and chicks, and they'd bury them up to their no-necks in the dirt, and then run the lawn mower over them. Now *that* is uyc-chh."

Her face was all pulled out of shape. "I'm calling the doctor."

There was a set of silver-backed military brushes on the counter. I picked them up and started brushing back my wet hair. I looked at her in the mirror and said, "Very good idea. You call the doctor. Make it a voodoo doctor, if you can get Inboard to clear a line to Haiti. Get a specialist in resurrection. Tell him we're not sure Jimmy is completely all the way dead...that he seems to be clinging ferociously to life...*your* life, *my* life, *Bran's* life...."

She started to cry. I put the brushes down and turned to her, but I didn't take her in my arms, usually *pro forma*. I just stared at her.

She fell against me, put her arms around me.

"Then," I said, "he pushed her away." And I pushed her away.

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She looked at me. She said, "What?"

"He stared back at her," I said, "and said simply, 'We don't walk backward, do we? You're his wife; you'll *always* be his wife, even if you remarry, even if you're canonized; he owns you. You say no, but five years from now you'll make a deal with Simon & Schuster and have poor Bran out there ghost-write your memoirs—*I Was Kercher's Koncubine.*' And he shook his head sadly," I said, "and he walked to the door and walked out." And then I walked past her to the door and walked out.

They all looked at me as I re-entered the library. I patted the Abominable Snowman on the belly and resumed my appointed seat, ready to let Jimmy have another go at me. Bamboo shoots under the fingernails would have been a happier prospect.

The videotape began playing again, and once again we were in this library, weeks ago, only a moment after Bran had identified Jimmy as Jimmy and caused me to lose a perfectly lovely breakfast from Du-Par's Farmhouse. The tall, thin black woman I didn't recognize now spoke, as the camera came in on her.

"My name is Eusona Parker, and I have been Mr. Crowstairs' housekeeper for eighteen, going on nineteen years; and that's him sitting right there; and don't *no*body try to say he's not in sound mind and body 'cause I have *known* him all these years and he's just as sharp and clean and neat as a pin as he's *ever* been. Is that what I'm supposed to say?"

No wonder I didn't recognize her. Eusona Parker had lost about eighty pounds.

Every Wednesday. That was Eusona's day. I'd only seen her half a dozen times through the years, when I was in Los Angeles and visiting Jimmy. But if anyone knew his state of health, it was Ms. Parker. What I remembered best about her was the "hearing aid."

She had a memory that should have been on display in the Smithsonian. It might be three or four years between our seeing each other; but when I'd come out of the blue guest room searching for coffee early on a Wednesday morning during one of my visits, there would be Eusona, dusting Jimmy's vast, endless hoard of *tchotchkes;* and she'd look up and grin as if I'd been there uninterruptedly for years, and she'd say, "Good morning, Larry, sleep good?" And I'd scream at her, "Hello, Eusona, how are you?" And she'd answer, "Doin' just fine, Larry; water's still hot." And I'd scream, "Thanks, Eusona."

The reason I screamed was that she wore a hearing aid. One of those little button things shoved into her ear, the cord trailing down to disappear into the capacious pocket of her wrap-around apron where the shape of the battery pack bulged.

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And we went on that way, amiably, until one time she stopped me in the back corridor leading to the greenhouse, took me by the hand like a small boy who's been caught eating worms in the schoolyard, and she said, "Mr. Bedloe, why do you always scream at me?"

"Why, uh, I'm sorry, Eusona," I said, terribly embarrassed, as one can only be embarrassed when one has been caught staring at the empty place between eyes and mouth where a leper's nose has fallen off. "I was speaking loudly because I wanted you to hear me."

"Well, I'm not hard of hearin', dear."

That *dear* of hers; it was the *dear* you use when you say, "No, dear, the round hole is for the *round* peg."

"You're not?"

"No, Mr. Bedloe, dear, I'm not hard of hearing."

"But you wear a hearing aid."

"*Mistuh* Bedloe, this is not a hearing aid." And she pulled the earphone of the transistor radio in her apron, out of her ear and, faintly, like fairy trumpets, I heard the tinny sound of Steve Garvey batting the brains out of the Cardinals' relief pitcher, bottom of the seventh, two out, a man on third.

All that went through my head as Kenneth L. Gross said, "Yes, Miss Parker, that's all you have to do, is identify Mr. Crowstairs."

"That's him. I said it."

"Thank you, Miss Parker."

"You're welcome, dear."

Then Missy identified him; then Jimmy as testator stated the date and stated that the will being made on that date took precedence over all other wills previously made by him, including any that might be found written in cuneiform on stone tablets by gas station attendants roaming in the Nevada deserts.

Then the roundelay went like this:

Kenny: Are you executing this document or prepared to execute this document with a complete satisfaction on your part that it says what you wish it to say and that you understand it in its entirety?

Jimmy: Affirmative. And it should be noted for the record that the last person to marry a duck lived four hundred years ago.

Kenny: Choke. Are you prepared to execute this document and accordingly state for the record, in my presence and in the presence of witnesses, that in so doing you are not acting under duress, undue influence, or under the influence of any drug or other substance that may impair your mental capacity?

Jimmy: I had a Coca-Cola about half an hour ago, does that count?

Kenny: No, sir, it does not. Please!

Jimmy: Are you sure, Kenny? I mean, if you take a piece of raw meat and you put it in a glass of Coke and leave it overnight it comes out looking like something from a James Bond movie. You know, all those little pi-

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ranha bubbles in there, they could chew the shit out of your brain cells.

Kenny: *It doesn't count, damn it!*

Jimmy: Then how about all the stuff I put up my nose just before we started filming?

The attorney laid his head down on his arms and pounded the tabletop with his fist. It was pathetic what Jimmy was doing to this poor soul. We all looked around in the semidark, but Kenneth L. Gross was back there in the shadows, no doubt chewing on the bit of his pipe.

On the screen Jimmy was being upbraided by his three witnesses. They whipped him into a semblance of probity and urged Kenny Gross to resume the proceedings.

The attorney said, "Therefore, in my presence and in the presence of the witnesses, God help us, is it your wish that you now execute the document and that we sign the document as witnesses thereto?"

Client responded in the affirmative.

"I will then ask, Mr. Crowstairs, that you now initial each and every page in the lower right-hand corner...."

"I'm left-handed."

"Then do it in the lower *left*-hand corner, but for God's sake initial the damned thing already!" He was shouting; it seemed to quell Jimmy. He started initialing. Gross went on weakly: "Up to but not including the signature page. For your information and for the record, this is being done so that no pages can be substituted in the future into this document."

It went on that way without hindrance. Jimmy had clearly grown bored with the activity and even bored with the japery that had made the proceedings minimally tolerable. Jimmy reached the signature page and filled in the location of execution of the will, then the date, and then he signed it. Then each of the witnesses signed location, date and name. The latter two added their place of residence. The will was returned to Gross who asked if Jimmy wanted the will kept in the attorney's vault and a conformed copy provided to Jimmy, or if the client wanted to keep the original with a conformed copy in Gross's possession. Jimmy waved a hand negligently. "You keep it, send me a copy."

Gross said he would do so and, painfully aware that the juice was running out of the presentation, said, "For the record, the witnesses need not be present during any videotaping portion which is about to occur and the only people who will be present will be myself, Mr. Crowstairs, and the two camera persons."

Yo-ho-ho. Here we go. Up there on the screen Missy, Bran and Eusona Parker rose, walked out of camera range and damned certainly out of the room; and Gross turned to Jimmy and said, "Mr. Crowstairs, if you wish, you may say some words to your beneficiaries or, for that matter, to anyone who may have been excluded by you

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under your last will which we have just executed."

He placed what was obviously a seating diagram of this room as Jimmy had planned it to be arranged on the desk in front of Jimmy, got up, and backed out of camera range. Now all we had on the screen was Jimmy sitting behind his desk, hands folded demurely, staring out at us, looking right to left as if he really could see us, back there four months ago when he had known for certain that he would live forever.

He looked first at SylviaTheCunt, then at me, then at Leslie, then at Bran who was seeing and hearing this for the first time—which may have been why he hadn't attended the burial ceremonies—and finally, at my right but Jimmy's extreme left, Missy. She hadn't spoken all day.

But I'd make book she knew what was coming.

Jimmy stared at us, and we stared back at him. He kept us waiting. I don't know what the others wanted—vindication, protestations of love, vast wealth, security for their twilight years, remorse, the slam-bang tang of gin and vermouth, a trip to the moon on gossamer wings—but all *I* wanted was to be turned loose. Tempest-tossed, righteous card-carrying wretched refuse, I merely yearned to breathe free.

This is how Jimmy died.

The story was in all the papers.

It was pried loose, finally, from one of the three *culeros* they pulled out of the other wreck. All three of them lived; one of them lost his left leg; one of them has no teeth. But that was Jimmy, not the crash.

Appropriately enough it was Halloween. That's Bradbury's favorite holiday, and it's mine, and it was Jimmy's. It was last week.

Jimmy had spent the evening at a party thrown by one of the two married couples who had been inside the black, plush velvet, upholstered ropes at the burial ceremonies. Huck and Carol Barkin. She's an architect, he's a writer. They were very close to Jimmy.

Around midnight Jimmy had left. He'd only had a couple of glasses of wine, perfectly sober and, in fact, had been drinking Perrier since ten o'clock. That figures in the story.

He took a cold quart bottle of Perrier with him when he left, swigging it straight from the mouth to his mouth in the car. Then he realized he was almost out of gas, probably couldn't make it back to the Valley and the ancestral manse, went looking for an open station on a holiday, near midnight, in Los Angeles, where odd-even allocation is taken seriously.

He found a serve-yourself that was open, but they wouldn't let him fill up because it was an odd-numbered day and he had license plates that ended in an even number. So he pulled off to one side and waited for the clock to run past midnight, when it would be

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the next day and he could get pumped up.

I wasn't there, no one was there in his head, but I know what he was like, and from the story the *culeros* told, it had to have happened like this. And even if it didn't, let's see how well we can get inside the characters, let's see how fluidly we can carry the action, let's see if we can plumb the intricate motivations.

What we need is a good opening, a tough literary hook.

Kerch Crowstairs slumped behind the wheel of the Rolls Corniche, listening to the second movement, the *Allegro appassionato*, of Brahms's Concerto in B flat major. In the chopped and channeled Chevy beside him the raucous clatter of the Eagles banged uneasy counterpoint....

No, too esoteric. Not Hammett enough.

How about this—

He was distracted. Thinking about the past, the future, indefinite times and opportunities passing too fast for analysis. Under him the Rolls hummed softly, waiting for the light to change. Beside him three chicanos in a decked Chevy raced their motor. Drag for pink slips, mister?

No, too diffuse. Not enough oomph.

I can't do it, Jimmy. I can't *write* like you! I can talk and think in your voice, because I can *hear* you...I've always had phonographic recall. But I can't put it down in your bloodthirsty Visigoth way.

What happened was....

He filled the tank. He drove back out onto the street. He was listening to the classical music on KFAC-FM. He was smoking his pipe. He was sitting at the light, waiting for it to change, simply enjoying the cool night air and the pleasant music and the smoke rising from the pipe. The empty Perrier bottle lay on the passenger seat. A car pulled up beside him in the left lane. Someone spoke in the night. He was caught up in the gentle feel of the music washing over him, the sense of ease and leisure. He was relaxed. For once, he wasn't on, he wasn't angry, he wasn't hyper. He was feeling good; and he paid no attention to the voice. But it spoke again, louder, coarser, directed at him. He looked across. Two young men, late teens, maybe early twenties, in the front seat. Another one in the back seat, looked asleep. The kid closest to him yelled again. "Hey! *Cabrón!* What're you smokin' in the pipe?" The light changed. He took off. At the next light they raced up, gunned the motor, closer to his lane now. "Hey, man, *de dónde?* I ast you what the fuck you smokin' in the pipe?" He stared ahead. He didn't want any hassles. God, don't these lights change? "Hey, *mamador*, you gonna answer me or I'm gonna come over there an' whip your ass?" He looked at them. "I'm smoking Essence of Asshole," he said. "I'm smokin' your mama." And the light changed, and he hit it. They ran up his tailpipe to the

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next light. Jesus, how many lights are there before the freeway? As he screeched to a halt, the one on the passenger side jumped out and came across to grab him. He dumped it into reverse, backed up three feet, threw open the door and knocked the silly sonofabitch flat on his ass. Then he took off through the just-changing light. Behind him the passenger was climbing back aboard as the driver decked it. They caught him at the next light and he thought about going straight through: the freeway was one street up. But now the adrenalin was pumping. He stopped at the light and grabbed the empty Perrier bottle. When the passenger got to his window, he swung the bottle in his left hand with a flat, scythelike movement and busted out the guy's teeth, emptied his mouth and sent him careening backward into the Chevy. *Then* he went through the light, turned sharp left, ran down the side street to the freeway entrance, hit the ramp doing sixty and was on the San Diego before the driver could load his buddy back into the trashwagon. *¡Hijo de la chingada!*

They caught him just beyond the interchange of the San Diego and Santa Monica freeways. He was in the fast lane, the number one next to the divider. He was doing seventy-five. The Chevy came up on the right and the berserk latino swung it over hard; lock to lock, maybe not—but *hard*. The Rolls took it just behind the door, slewed into the cyclone fence, scraped along throwing sparks back in a fan, then shot ahead as Jimmy floored the Corniche. *¡Puto pendejo!*

Doing ninety, he cut out of the number one lane, slanted across the second, third and fourth lanes, and ran away. The Chevy caught up on the grade leading through the saddle of the hills to the Valley. The *culeros* rear-ended him. Hard; once twice three times. Jimmy braked, speeded up, cut in and out, but the Chevy was hot, it ran him down like a bulldogger. *¡Vatos locos!*

Two miles before the Mulholland offramp the *cholos* said aw, fuck it, and decided to boom him. They came up in the number three, doing ninety-five, went ahead by two car-lengths and slant-drove across his bow. Jimmy stood on the brake but it didn't count. They impacted at eighty-five, the Corniche went in hard on the right front, ricocheted, spun out and went over the side. The Rolls hit the berm, dropped and began to somersault. The Chevy was horizontal across the three and four lanes, caught a centerpunch from a long-distance moving van, lifted, went tail-over onto its roof, sliding across the shoulder, followed Jimmy over the side two hundred yards beyond him and came to rest against a low hillside.

Behind the latinos the Rolls Corniche took one last roll, hit the crumbling hillside and went off like a can of beer shaken in a centrifuge. It blew apart scattering hot metal and parts of

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Jimmy all over the Santa Monica Mountains.

Say goodbye to Kercher O.J. Crowstairs.

"I'm not feeling too giddy about all this, now that we're alone," Jimmy said from the screen. "You five are the most I've got left. Everybody else has been taken care of; okay, they're okay; I took good care of them, in the ancillary sections of the will. But you five are the big scores, and I wanted you to hear it straight from me."

He stopped, wiped his mouth. *Jimmy nervous?* Come on, give me a break here.

"Missy, you're first," he said, looking all the way to his left, directly where Mississippi was slouched in her seat, long legs crossed straight out in front of her. "You get The Kerch Corporation and all its holdings."

SylviaTheCunt gasped, off to my left.

Jimmy went on. "You keep it running. There's the land up at Lake Isabella, we own it free and clear now, and it'll be built up pretty big within the next five years, they're putting in that Kern County International Airport. Keep adding to the art, find a place to show it, something nice and stately like the Norton Simon Museum...you know...something toney and really chi-chi. Set your own salary, keep on as much of the staff as you need, hire more, fire some, do what the hell you want with it. It was just a dodge to keep the tax fuckers off my carcass, anyhow. You make it into something terrific, kiddo. I love you, babe. You watched out for me real good."

Missy was crying. Toughest woman I ever met, but she—even she—lost it when Jimmy went to work at the top of his form. In Iran there's a word—*zirangi*—it means cleverness, or wiliness. The Machiavellian quality. It's much admired by the Shiites. Jimmy would have been a smash in Islam.

"And for the record," Jimmy added, "let it be known that never once in all the years you and I worked together, did we once so much as fondle each other's genitalia. The bantlings will need their gossip, m'love; and they'll fasten first on she who was my amanuensis. Let the slushfaces herewith take note: you and I worked together for fifteen years plus however many more wash under the bridge from the date of this taping before I bite the big one, mostly on the basis of your being the best goddamned pool-shooter I ever met. I would have fired your tidy ass a million times, kiddo, if it hadn't been that you shot the most unbelievable three-bank cushions into the hip pockets."

Missy was dry now. And smiling gently.

Then he turned to Brandon Winslow sitting right beside her.

"Bran, my friend...I've done you right, and I've done you wrong. But you never once treated me like a hot-

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shot, and for that I cannot thank you enough. Other people were in awe, or they wanted to drink my blood, or they came sharpshooting. But you were my friend and my colleague, and you started out as something like my student but you went beyond what I could show you. And you maintained, chum. You make the Hall of Fame for hanging in there. So this house is yours. The house and the grounds and everything in it. Live here, and change it any way you want to make your nest the way I made it *my* nest. I built the west wing full of separate apartments for other writers who need a place to flop. So lay in half a dozen real outlaws, Bran. And the only rule ought to be that they can stay and be happy as long as they *write*. If they turn into leaners, if you catch them sitting around all day watching *The Price is Right*, boot their asses into the street. But if they're producing, they can live here forever.

"Do it for me and for you, Bran."

SylviaTheCunt was making sounds like the *Titanic* going down.

Then Jimmy looked straight ahead. At Leslie.

He didn't say anything. He just stared.

Leslie took it for about thirty seconds. Then she got up and walked to the side of the room, where she stood with her arms folded, watching the screen, still curious, but—once having freed herself of Jimmy's power—unwilling to let him manipulate her beyond a certain point of tolerable terror.

Now Jimmy was staring at an empty seat.

She's insensitive, or maybe desensitized; but she's tough. Which also explains how she could have stayed married to him as long as she did. High-fashion barbed wire wrapped in Spandex.

"Leslie, you did okay in the settlement. But I suppose you rate more than a standard 'I'm sorry,' which doesn't count for shit...."

"You can say that again," Leslie murmured from the side of the room.

"...so the Corporation is depositing a million in the Bermuda account for you; I've signed over ownership of the magazine to your name; Kenny will transfer the chalet at Villarvolard to you...so you can keep that ski bum of yours on the string a little longer; and Missy'll find a letter in the safe that transfers a substantial block of non-voting stock in The Kerch Corporation to you. Stay out of the business, take the dividends, and try to remember me fondly."

"Right," Leslie said from the side of the room.

Now he looked all the way to his right, directly at SylviaTheCunt, who *had* to know what was coming. There was still a lot in the till, and from what Jimmy had said of her in years past, I knew she'd be bolted to that chair till the final farthing had been accounted for; but, for a wonder, she *had* to

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know what was on the way.

"To my beloved sister, Sylvia....

"And that's the first time in over twenty years I've said your name without adding the sobriquet. Seems truncated, but these are formal proceedings and I want to do it without flaw so after I've finished talking to you—which you'll sit through right to the last syllable on just the off-chance that I might act like a brother even though we both know I despise you with a pure, blue flame of loathing, and you might be able to cadge a few bucks—where was I? Fouled in my own syntax. Oh, yeah, I remember. You'll sit through it because you cling to greedy hope like a leech on floating garbage. You figure I can't be that big a prick after all these years, and so you'll wait for the last rotten word I'm going to speak to you, sister dearest. And I'm doing this without flaw so that you won't even have a scintilla of hope that you can contest this will. It's solid, Sylvia; ironclad, rockribbed, diamond-encrusted solid.

"And the bottom line is that you get zip.

"Not a cent.

"Not a penny.

"Nothing is what you get. Nada, nyet, nihil, nil, nihilum! Nothing, because if I have any dislike of women as a species, it comes from you. Nothing, because if I haven't been able, my whole life, entirely to trust a woman, it's because of what you ran on me when I was a kid.

"Sylvia, I don't think I've ever had a chance to tell you how deeply and thoroughly I loathe you. No, that isn't even correctly put. I loathed you for *most* of my life, but about twelve years ago I just sort of dropped you out of the universe. You ceased to exist. You were never there.

"I know you can't doubt that, because you were on the other end of the phone that time when—"

SylviaTheCunt screamed.

"Stop it! *Stop him right now!*"

Kenny Gross moved in from the shadowy rear of the library and cut off the Betamax. The screen went white. So did SylviaTheCunt. She was on her feet, the veins standing out in her forehead; a dumpy, big-bosomed woman in middle years. Jimmy always said she was one of those pathetic creatures that had been assembled by The Great Engineer in the Sky without a love mechanism in her. It didn't take a writer to see that.

"This is criminal!" she shouted. She clutched her purse to her stomach and kept hitting it with her fist. She wanted to strike out at something more offensive, but that was under dirt now. "I'll fight this! I will!"

Missy came around her chair. She towered over SylviaTheCunt and looked down at her, eyes blazing. It may not have been Jimmy reborn, but the spirit had floated out of the grave, off the silent screen, and had entered the body of his most stalwart defender. "You won't do *shit*, dolly. You *knew*

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what he had for you. You've always known. He hasn't *spoken* to you for twenty years till now. You'll fight? It is to laugh, dolly! He left the Corporation to me and I'll put ten *thousand* attorneys on it. Wanna fight? I'm waiting!"

It drained her. Bran came around and took her by the shoulders and took her back to her seat.

"For the record I'd suggest you watch the rest of the videotape, no matter how distasteful," Kenny Gross said to SylviaTheCunt. "In the event you *do* contemplate any legal action. Or if you prefer, you can wait in the living room, and when the tape is finished I can run this section for you alone."

She stared at him with animosity. She looked around the room at the rest of us, her eyes like slagheaps. Then she went back and resumed her seat.

The attorney started the tape again, and for the next twenty minutes Jimmy rang every change he could on the woman. How she had brutalized him as a child, with specific deeds that he had remembered with that quirky selective memory of his. Affronts and mean tricks that were almost ludicrous but which, if you remembered how susceptible you were as a little kid, were monstrously cruel. How she had beaten down her husband, whom Jimmy had liked even though he wouldn't stand up to her. How she had become a deplorable human being—racist, bigoted, coarse, provincial and, for Jimmy the most inexcusable of all, bone stick stone stupid.

For twenty minutes we all averted our eyes as Jimmy got into it like a 'lude-stoked jazz musician trying to blow Bud Powell back from the Great Beyond. It was a bravura ugly performance, many riffs, a lot of high shrieking runs and a lot of low animal growls. None of us could look.

But SylviaTheCunt looked.

With hard, mean eyes; straight up at the screen; locked in eternal combat with the creature for whom she had seldom felt anything but the most destructive kind of sibling rivalry.

Jimmy once told me how he had gotten SylviaTheCunt to stop pulling his hair. He said one time when she grabbed a fistful of his straight, brown hair he had gritted his teeth and started turning his body in her grasp. Around and around until the hair pulled so tight the pain went all the way to the soles of his feet. It was so horrible, so excruciating, that *she* had been appalled at how painful it must have been...and she let him loose. And whenever she would try it again, he would inflict that pain on himself. Until she was so horrified by it that she stopped. "That's how I developed a very high threshold for pain," he had said.

I remember when he got done telling me that...I was gritting *my* teeth.

But finally, thank God finally, Jimmy had had all of it even *he* could handle. He had turned and turned till the

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pain was insupportable, even for him. Even my best friend, Jimmy, with that seemingly limitless capacity for revenge, for not just getting *even*, but for getting a bit more of the vigorish in shylock interest, even *he* had had all he could stomach.

"You can stop it now," SylviaThe-Cunt said. And she stood up. The screen went white again, lights came on in the library where evening had descended, and Jimmy's sister looked around at all of us.

"You haven't heard the last of me," she said softly, and then she left. *You haven't heard the last of me.*

But I had the sure feeling that we had; we had heard the last of her. Jimmy had called in all the debts from his childhood.

We sat down again, the lights went off, the Betamax went on, and Jimmy turned his head slightly to the left, looking straight at me in my chair. He had saved me for last and he said, "Larry, buddy? You out there?"

We were driving from Chicago to New Orleans in an attempt to make Mardi Gras, which we would miss by a full day, arriving on Ash Wednesday, because in the next five miles we would spin out across the snow-covered highway, escape being pile-driven by an oncoming truck by inches, plunge off the side of the road, and bury the Corvette headfirst to its rear wheels in snowbanks fifteen feet deep. But we were still five miles away from missing Mardi Gras when he said the thing I remember most clearly from all the years that we knew each other.

He was driving. He said, "You know the one thing about me that I'm terrified anyone will ever find out. The one lie that makes all of my life a lie."

"I do?"

"Yep. You know it, but you don't know you know it."

"That makes no sense. If I knew it, then I'd know it."

"You know more about me than anyone else, and you have the data; but you don't know how much I fear it, how frightened I am that it might come out."

"I'll never tell."

"You might. Get pissed off at me sometime in the future; I might screw you; you might let it slip without knowing it."

"Never. I'll never tell a living soul; honest to God, you can trust me, Rocco: I'll take the filthy secret to my grave.

"No, I'll take it to *my* grave. But you might still tell it."

"If you're dead there'd be no way you could protect against that, is there?"

He thought about that for a while. This was before he married Leslie. We were good and close friends, whatever that meant. But he thought about it, seriously thought about this terrible thing I knew that he was ashamed of, the one thing in a life like his so filled

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with things any normal human being might find the cause of sleepless nights, that didn't bother him in the slightest way. He thought about the knowledge I possessed, this Damoclean sword I held over his life and his career and his work in which he revealed *everything*. Everything except the one bit of knowledge that made all of his life a lie.

And he said, "I'll have to figure out a way to keep you quiet after I'm dead."

"Good luck," I said, laughing lightly; and then we hit the icy patch and started to spin out.

He looked straight at me, having saved me for last.

"Larry, I herewith make you the executor of my literary estate. You have control of every novel, short story, essay, article, review, anthology and introduction I ever wrote. All those millions of words are in your care, buddy. You're the one they'll have to come to if they want to reprint even one of my commas."

I sat stunned. If he had done me the way he'd done SylviaTheCunt, taken this last chance to purge all the swamp animosity of a lifetime...or if he had done me the way he'd done Leslie, tried to clear his conscience of real or fancied harm he'd visited on her...if he'd done me as he'd done Missy and Bran, paid off for loyalty and friendship and domination of their lives...I wouldn't have been surprised.

But, oh you malicious wonderful sonofabitch! You did the one thing I cannot bear: *you tied me to you forever.*

Malicious? Probably not. It was just Jimmy insuring his memory. Going for posterity, and dragging me along with him, kicking and screaming every micromillimeter of the way. What a sweetly conniving mind. I couldn't even condemn him; hate him, yes, revile him, yes, rail at what he was doing, yes—*against which I had no defense*—but he was merely demonstrating, as a perfect paradigm for his whole breakneck plunge of a life...the ugliness of simply being human.

I sat stunned. And the voice of the turtle was heard in the library: "Would you mind cutting it for a minute?"

Turtle, the voice was mine; stunned, I sat in the darkness. The sound of very old, rinkytink music played distantly in the empty concert hall of my head.

Jimmy had set me up to be either his servant or his Griswold.

Poe. Jimmy got the idea from Poe.

He saw himself as Edgar Allan, cut off in his prime from the benefits of posterity's accolades; he saw me as the Reverend Rufus W. Griswold, but a Griswold who was walled up himself, not free to blacken Poe's name, a Griswold never free of the sound of the telltale heart, Jimmy's heart, still beating, his will indomitable, his presence felt until the last moment of my own Griswold-trapped life.

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We had talked of this. Poe was one of Jimmy's idols. He was merely an amusing story teller to me. But Jimmy even had a puppet made of Edgar Allan, had it hanging in the living room as an everpresent reminder of what heights fantasy could reach.

And we had discussed what Griswold had done to Poe.

He had buried him for a hundred years.

What a poor judge of human nature Poe had been. What an ass. But let the critic Daniel Hoffman (Doubleday, 1972) tell it:

> *Most of all,* [Poe's] *own Imp of the Perverse so arranged the history of his career that his literary executor was his most invidious enemy, the Reverend Rufus W. Griswold. This man, an ex-minister, a busybody of letters, an incessant anthologist and publicizer, a failed poetaster fattening on the writings of others as does a moth eating Gobelin tapestries, went to extraordinary pains, after Poe's death, to present the deceased writer in a manner designed to make his name a household word for the dissolute, immoral, recklessly debauched. Griswold falsified the facts of Poe's life, and he revised the texts of Poe's letters, always with this calumnious end in view....*
>
> *The scoundrel's punishment is this: he is now known everywhere, if known at all, as the maligner of a helpless genius; whereas had he done his job honestly, he'd have won his proper modest niche among the footnotes by which the nearly forgotten are saved from total oblivion.*

How better to keep me quiet? What insanity! I didn't even know *which* of the many seamy facts of Jimmy's life was the one that so paralyzed him with fear of its disclosure! I wouldn't have talked about him; I wanted to be *free* of him. I simply wanted to be able to say, when asked, "Yeah, Kerch Crowstairs and I were close friends for over a quarter of a century; he'll be missed; his like will never come again;" the usual bullshit. That's *all* I wanted.

But the crazy paranoid sonofabitch couldn't even credit me with decent motivations *after* he was gone. My God, does fear have a life of its own, to keep feeding on the living after the carrier of the plague has gone down the hole?

"Okay, you can start it again," I said.

Kenny Gross ran it back and hit the *play* button. Jimmy was in the middle of what he'd been saying when my heart began to slam at me. "—if they want to reprint even one of my commas."

He looked so damned innocent up there.

Just chatting with his best friend;

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just asking his best chum buddy to take care of his memory.

"Larry, you know I'm not afraid of dying. Not that, and nothing else. Not spiders, snakes, being burned, being crippled, heights, closed-in places, ridicule, rejection...none of them ever got to me. Very high pain threshold, remember? But it's tomorrow that gets me, Larry. The day *after* you see this tape. Will they still read me? Will I be on the bookshelves, the Modern Library, matched sets in good bindings? *That's* what I'm afraid of, Larry. Posterity. I want a chance to go on after I'm gone. Fifty years from now I want them to come back to my stuff, the way they did to Poe's, and Dickens's, and Conrad's. I don't want to wind up like Clark Ashton Smith or Cabell or the other Smith, Thorne Smith. I don't want bits and pieces of my unfinished stories written by the literary vampires. You've got to promise me, Larry: nobody will ever touch one of the fragments in my file. I probably won't know when I'm going to buy the farm, probably won't have time to get into the file with a blowtorch and crisp all the false starts and half-attempts. I've got them locked up, everything that's not finished, all in one file drawer in the office. Missy has the only other key. Get all that stuff out of there and burn it for me, buddy.

"Pride isn't part of it...honest to God it isn't! You remember when we talked about Poe how I said he had the right idea, that it was the *work*, it was Art, that held the high road, not religion or good deeds or friendship or patriotism? None of those. The stories, the books. That's all you can put a bet on. That continues. And I couldn't bear to think of some half-assed science fiction hack dredging up a line or two I started and didn't know how to finish, and writing a whole book off it, the way they've done to poor old Robert E. Howard, or 'Doc' Smith. They even did it to Poe and Jack London and...oh Christ, Larry, you *know* what I'm saying. Promise me!"

He waited. He watched that camera and he waited, four months ago. I murmured, "I promise, Jimmy."

"You take care of me when I'm gone, Larry. You're the only one I can trust to do it. Keep me alive, Larry."

And if there was more to that vile videotaped document, I don't remember it. After a while I was sitting there and the lights were on, and everybody else had left the room.

He did it. The clever sonofabitch did it. He figured a way to keep me tied to him. He knew I'd do the job.

I'd make sure there were regular retrospectives of his germinal stories; I'd write the best kind of interesting essays and articles about how significant Kercher O.J. Crowstairs had been in the parade of contemporary American letters; I'd set up seminars at the Modern Language Association conclaves; I'd edit anthologies of his work, putting the stories into fresh and in-

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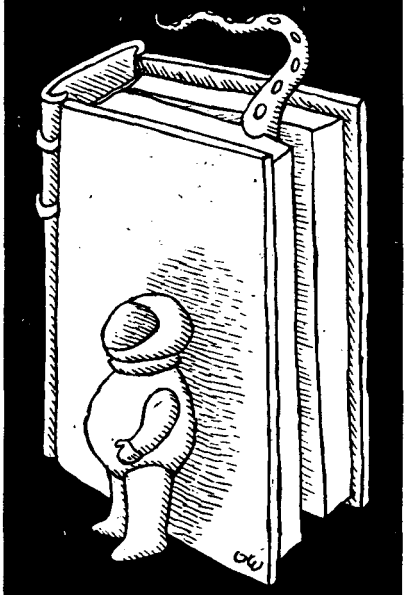
Books

BARRY N. MALZBERG



Galaxy: Thirty Years of Innovative Science Fiction, Edited by Frederik Pohl, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander; Playboy Press, 1980, $10.95.

Crompton Divided, by Robert Sheckley; Bantam Books, 1979, $1.95.

New Voices III, Edited by George R.R. Martin; Berkley Books, 1980, $1.95.

Times is hard, as Mrs. Lovitt pointed out to Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, times is hard, love, but just for a moment let us slip away, let the nascent decade dangle, let us consider 1952 when you and I were young, Charlie.

Actually, Charlie, you weren't so young any more, you were a high school student already with physics and math requirements; more and more the keeping of the flame reposed upon *me*. You introduced me to science fiction, Charlie, laid a whole bunch of ASF and the Healy/McComas on me and pointed the way to Stephen's Book Service, but then you had to go and join the Madison chess team and start cramming for the college boards. You done me wrong, Charlie. You left me on my own.

Not your fault, actually, that I found the ASF stories mostly arcane and impenetrable. That was adult science fiction for you, and every now and then an "E For Effort" or "Vintage Season" or "Private Eye" would slip through, just to keep me coming. In the interstices there were hints — oh, there were more than hints — that the

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stuff might be readable, that it had something to offer behind all those crazy covers that maybe *From Here To Eternity* or even *A Tale of Two Cities* might not. But you went your own way, Charlie, and you left me hanging, and I might have gone my own way too until I found out that there were other magazines, that ASF was not (as you had told me) the sweep of the field. I found *Galaxy* on my own, Charlie. In Simon's Luncheonette on the corner of Flatbush Avenue and Avenue K on Valentine's Day 1952 and you could look it up. The cover, white bordered like no science fiction magazine should be, said something about a new Heinlein novelette, "The Year of the Jackpot" and there was the third installment of a serial called *The Demolished Man* by someone named Alfred Bester. I knew Heinlein from all that great stuff in the forties *Astounding*. For thirty-five cents how could I go wrong? I bought *Galaxy* and took it home, Charlie. I read stories by Damon Knight, Jerry Sohl and the aforementioned Heinlein before I read the last installment of the serial. My life, my old and departed friend, was ineluctably changed.

I could *read* it. The work was imaginative but it was accessible. It not only conformed to but exceeded those standards of "good writing" which my thirteen year old mind understood. Science fiction could be — well, it could be part of what the teachers were telling us to call "literature."

It is almost time to drop this narrative frame, Charlie; times is hard but the times is all we got; we are ninety-four days into the new decade as I write this. *Galaxy* is on its fourth ownership now; the new guys in Boston haven't got out an issue yet (there hasn't been an issue for over six months) but are talking about a large-size, heavily-illustrated rocket format for the juveniles; Horace Gold is beached in California in the third decade of his retirement; you are somewhere out in the world Charlie and I have had no news of you for a quarter of a century. But let us hang onto 1952 for one more paragraph. Let us try to surmise what *Galaxy* was about.

It was about a hundred and sixty-two pages and 35¢, Charlie; it was edited by an autocratic wild man with Big Plans and Great Ideas; it was dedicated to the proposition as they like to say that science fiction could be, *had* to be as well-written at the top as "literature" and that the science fictional premise of any story was to be investigated, mocked, parodied, excoriated, *anything* but simply posited, as was the case with "traditional" science fiction. Because its editor feared and hated science it was in many ways a superficial and polemical magazine. Because he forced his prejudices upon the writers he gathered unto him (and if they did not like his premise, they could, like every other strong editor's writers, simply get lost), the work operated through a surprisingly narrow

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conceptual and stylistic range. Because he chose to rewrite and rearrange copy, the magazine first alienated and subsequently burnt out most of its best contributors. Because of all of this and the exigencies of the market itself, *Galaxy* entered upon a long, subtle decline marked by its publishers cut of pagination with the January 1955 issue, lurched like late Hemingway prose into self-parody and was no longer at the cutting edge of the field by the time Horace Gold escaped at the end of the decade. The decade of competence under Fred Pohl and the decade of incompetence of successor management have obliterated for most readers the true dimensions of Gold's accomplishment and the contribution which the magazine made. Although Gold clearly failed (his magazine never reached more than 100,000 readers nor did any of his writers in his time find an audience any larger), he succeeded because his vision became welded into science fiction, and every writer who came into the field after 1955 was inextricably bound to that vision. He lost but he won. Perhaps this is as close to a definition of science ficiton itself as I would care to come. Wherever you are, Charlie — once you said you would write it and now I suspect you do not even read it — remember this. We lost but we won. I lost but I won.

Galaxy: Thirty Years of Innovative Science Fiction is as close to a thirtieth anniversary issue as the magazine will be likely to obtain; this review, in the 11/80 issue of one of *Galaxy's* two major extant competitors is as close to celebration as we will get.

All right, this is an uneven book. It is not the book that could have been. Biased *away* from the great early half decade (for inexplicable reasons only six of the twenty-six selections are taken from issues prior to 1956) the very standards for selections are questionable; Alan Arkin and Jerome Bixby are figures of consequence, but their inclusion in an anthology which omits Edgar Pangborn, Cyril M. Kornbluth* and Floyd L. Wallace cannot be defended. Sheckley and Knight and Tenn belong of course but "Cost of Living," "To Serve Man" and "Betelgeuse Bridge" are not exemplary; all did better work and more recognized work for the magazine. Most of the contents are from the sixties, when *Galaxy* was a competent but not a distinctive magazine; most of the writers — Asimov, Tiptree, Lafferty, Le Guin, Silverberg — are writers whose careers coincided rather than fused with the magazine. The Index is particularly disastrous. For inexplicable reasons it compiles not only stories but reviews of the work of writers under the headings, and this clutter leads to a kind of uselessness as bibliography; the uselessness is compounded by the fact that the (anony-

**Kornbluth is listed as Fred Pohl's collaborator on a 1974 story written many years after Kornbluth's death from notes; the Kornbluth of "Marching Morons" or "The Altar at Midnight" is not to be deduced.*

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mous) compiler makes no cognizance whatsoever of pseudonyms and mingles reviews of books by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D. in the entry for Evelyn E. Smith, prolific contributor of the fifties. (My own entry is typically flawed; I appear under my own name and two pseudonyms, a story listed under one of those pseudonyms was never written by me or, as far as I know, anyone). Here once again in our field is example of work so shoddily done that it never should have been done at all.*

But then again there are the memoirs preceding the stories; not all of the writers have contributed, but many have and some of them are irreplaceable testimony. Budrys's essay on his (disastrous) spell as Gold's assistant in 53/54 is important; Phil Klass's bitter memoir which in shrouded terms more or less accuses Horace Gold of having devastated his career as a writer is important; Robert Sheckley's recollection of the weekly poker games ritualized in Gold's apartment is important (and the sudden insight that *Galaxy* the magazine may have been one enormous poker session transmogrified to print is unsettling) and Alfred Bester's afterword, an unalloyed tribute to the editor who, he says, worked him through *The Demolished Man* and gave him his career is moving. Moving also is a transcript of Horace Gold's taped remarks to Fred Pohl conceding that his mind was in a constant fog (due largely to the pain of an undiscovered spinal injury) during his ten year editorial regime; if his mind had *not* been in a fog *Galaxy* would certainly have been something different. I am not sure of this — no one around at the time seems to think that Horace's mind was clouded in the least; he paid *too* much attention — but I am not sure of many things about *Galaxy* now.

Times is hard, Mrs. Lovitt, times is hard. But although they have put *Galaxy* into the ground its light cannot be extinguished. This is a very nicely produced book by the way, decently bound, oversize, good paper, attractively typeset, nice (and appropriate) cover art and an all around bargain for $10.95. There is no excuse to wait for the paperback.

Robert Sheckley fell out of print and into neglect in the early seventies (actually he was over at *Playboy* making ten times Horace Gold money and all around celebrating the expatriate life), but that condition has been remedied: Ace has reissued almost a dozen of his novels and collections (including the wonderful *Dimension of Miracles*, a virtually ignored 1968 novel that takes Voltaire into the cosmos and should have been duly honored in its time), Bantam has brought out a collection simultaneous with this first

*Martin Greenberg advises me that the index will be thoroughly cleaned up for trade and mass market paperback editions; knowing Greenberg's record on promises and his own scholarship I am sure that it will be.

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paperback publication of *Crompton Divided* and Sheckley is, of course, now fiction editor under Ben Bova at Robert Guccione's *Omni*, which if nothing else has given much comfort and some chips to the survivors of Stuyvesant Town poker. Sheckley has been long due for re-evaluation, and he is now in the process of obtaining it. His sardonic and effortlessly appearing extrapolations in the fifties, during which most of his important oeuvre was appearing in *Galaxy*, have held up significantly and have demonstrated a point which should have been obvious (but was not) at the time: Sheckley's smooth comic surfaces and wispy, often confused alien menaces concealed real purpose; he was one of the darkest writers of his time, and when he took the mask off as he occasionally did in *"Warm"* or *A Pilgrimage to Earth* or *"The Language of Love"* he was outright terrifying. Sheckley began to get into trouble, Damon Knight theorized two decades ago, when people began to tell him that what he did was Art and he believed it, but Knight I think missed the point. Sheckley got into trouble, or at least began to publish much less, when he began to tangle, as all of us who are serious must, with the implications of his vision. *Crompton Divided* is only his second novel in a dozen years (the 1975 *Options* was dismissed by Pyramid and was published almost invisibly; a picaresque not dissimilar in structure and intent to *Dimension of Miracles*, it had elements of ambition as it showed Sheckley reaching for a new voice that he did not, in process, quite work out), and by the standards of the contemporary market is commendable work.

What this novel *is* — it was originally published in England some years ago, appeared in a small US hardcover edition, Bantam has given it almost initial visibility now — is an expansion of Sheckley's 1958 novelette "Join Now" published (pseudononymously) in *Galaxy*; it suffers from the inevitable strengths and weaknesses of any expansion (and I have perpetrated enough to know whereof I speak). That is, its intriguing premise, truncated as was so much *Galaxy* short fiction toward whimsy, has been given full play, but the plot has been taken to novelistic dimension more through interpolation than dynamic and it has a peremptory feel. The premise is breathtaking — Crompton has sold his id and ego, leased them out to tenant personalities of settlers on a Venus who needs human colonists any way it can get them; now it is time for this one-third man to recover the other parts of himself and does he have problems! — but the development fairly routine. "Join Now" was a case example of the great strengths and weaknesses of the Horace Gold School of Fiction, it was "metaphoric," "socially imaginative," "satirical," "socially observant," but the scientific underpinnings were shaky at the least and underexplicated at the best, and the development of the

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novelette, moving *against* explication tended to ultimately use the devices of genre science fiction only as a means of making closer-to-home social and psychological insights.

Sheckley was always among the best of Gold's contributors; he was at the top of the field, literally, from his first few stories in 1952 until his partial abandonment of science fiction in the early sixties. Writers at the top are there because to some degree they are the personna of their field. What I am trying to say is that *Crompton Divided*, two decades after Gold's retirement, is Horace's living, breathing vision through the voice of Sheckley; I think it is fair to say that both must accept the credit, both must accept the blame. No editor — as Klass points out in his bitter memoir — *writes* the stories, of course. Sheckley *wrote Crompton Divided*. But Gold impelled it. He will continue to impel. His legacy is certain.

George R.R. Martin is quite right in pointing out in his introduction to *New Voices III: The Campbell Award Nominees* (which has yet another affectionate memoir of JWC by Isaac Asimov) that it is no longer the magazines or the editors who control the field but the writers themselves; what have surfaced in the seventies have been not schools of fiction or editorial personna but a number of discrete voices who have made their way through a full range of markets. Shortly after Campbell's death (7/11/71), *Analog's* publisher endowed a plaque which would be awarded in his memory at the world science fiction conventions to the "best" new writer as determined by Hugo ballot poll. This anthology is the third of what is proposed to be a continuing series, and publisher whimsy being what it is is five years behind, carrying original stories by the Campbell award finalists at the Australian world convention of 1975. These writers are John Varley, Brenda Pierce, Suzy McKee Charnas, Alan Brennert, Felix C. Gotschalk and P.J. Plauger, and by this time two of them have disappeared, one has quietly left the field, one has been clearly the major discovery of the decade (Varley of course) and two of them continue to publish marginally. The winner, P.J. Plauger, is one of those who have virtually disentangled; Varley was a close runner-up, and awards are not supposed to make any more sense, to be sure, than the science fiction of Horace Gold.

New Voices III unfortunately is a weak volume; I speculate (perhaps incorrectly) that what was unloaded on Martin and Berkley were the trunks of various writers; I am not sure that any of these stories were written specifically for this volume. The Gotschalk might have been; it is by turns the most graphic and relentless science fiction sex story ever published and could have appeared, I suspect, in no other market even now; it has, to me, everything that a relentless, graphic science

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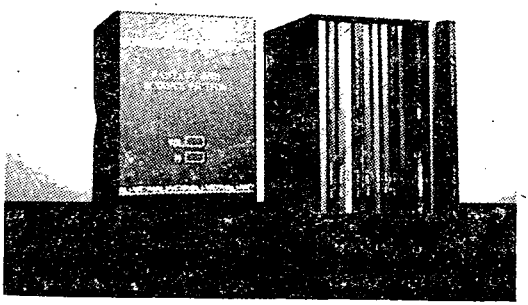
fiction sex story needs to have except a sense of humor and a structure which would lead to proper ending. I suspect that "The Wishes of Maidens" will become in a subterranean fashion, however, a much read story. Brennert, who is now a television and screenplay writer and at the bare age of 26 astonishingly successful, contributes two, "Stage Whisper" and "Queen of the Magic Kingdom" which — may I whisper this? — are literary short stories, not a breath of science fiction and quite promising; "Stage Whisper" has a powerful emotional kick. "Beatnik Bayou" is the weakest Varley story I have ever read, which makes it acceptable by any reasonable standard; the other stories make no impression.

"There are no new voices, there are only new versions," I suspect Horace Gold might have whispered reading a review like this a long time ago. A long time ago he might have been right; now he is wrong. We have the voices, often we have nothing but the voices; the focus is gone and, I suppose, good riddance to it, but ah Charlie, Charlie, Ben Reich knew it would be the Man With No Face who would get him and in those days, *pace* everybody, everyone had a face. 1952 was "The Year of Jackpot," Charlie. There ain't been another since.



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In which Murdoch McMurdoch, of the Pan-Galactic Mission of Brotherhood to All Sentient Beings, makes an accidental landing on an E-type planet, stumbles upon a remarkable ritual and proves again that one man's meat . . .

A Report From the Snith Digest

BY

PHYLLIS MACLENNAN

Murdoch McMurdoch popped the hatch and couldn't believe his eyes. Instead of the noisy, bustling spaceport he had had every reason to expect, he gazed upon a dim, primeval forest, shrouded in mist and silence. He slammed the hatch shut and whirled to face the computer.

"This isn't Caritas!" he accused, indignant.

"I did not say it was," the computer pointed out. Its flat mechanical voice managed to convey a hint of sulkiness. "It is not my fault if you cannot read."

"What do you mean, I can't read!" He snatched up his log, riffled through it until he found a slip of paper with a long line of numbers on it, and rattled them off triumphantly.

"That is where we are: the E-type planet closest to those coordinates."

Murdoch gulped.

"Could I have copied them wrong?"

The computer answered, "Yes." It did not go on to point out, as his superior in the Pan-Galactic Mission of Brotherhood to All Sentient Beings certainly would have, that the surprise would have been if he had got them right.

"Oh, *no!* Not *again!*" he wailed. "I was so careful!" But in spite of all his care, he seemed to make mistakes more often than not; and this one was a beaut. He had managed to lose, not only himself (a small thing), but a large and expensive spacecraft loaded with teaching materials for the Mission on Caritas. If Headquarters should find out—! But maybe they wouldn't, if he didn't have to return to Zolta to recheck the coordinates.

"Can you plot a course to Caritas from here?" he asked the computer anxiously, his normally rosy face pale

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with foreboding.

"Yes. It will take approximately three hours to search the star charts for this sector, identify our location—"

"Fine. Do it," he interrupted, relieved. He would worry about Caritas when he got there. In the meantime, knowing he would not have to face Father Bordelas was enough to cheer him now. He strolled to the port viewer and contemplated the Jurassic landscape outside. After a month in space it would be nice to go for a walk on solid ground, though the scenery was a bit menacing: swampy, primitive, giant tree ferns and unfamiliar gymnosperms, vines twisting among them like snakes—there could be anything out there.

"Dinosaur country," he chuckled to himself and was charmed by the vividness of his own imagination as he thought he saw three such creatures trudge into view.

"Dinosaurs!?"

He pressed his nose against the screen. He hadn't imagined them. They were real, and they did resemble Tyrranosaurus Rex's baby brothers: about his own height, grey, lizard-like, their mouths displayed a daunting number of teeth as they chatted to each other, but they were chatting to each other, and in their wizened forelimbs they carried baskets of fodder. They were clearly sentients, and he eyed them wistfully, missionary zeal bubbling to the surface. He thought of going out to greet them, saying a few words about Brotherhood—he might even make a convert! The beauty of this idea carried him away: he saw himself standing before an audience of enthralled lizards, winning their hearts with his inspired oratory; arriving on Caritas, long overdue and having wasted a sizable amount of fuel, true—but bearing the priceless treasure of a whole new planet awakened to the Faith. They wouldn't be hard on him then, would they? ... Of course, he had never been allowed to proselytize as yet, but there was no one here to tell him not to, and what could go wrong? On the other hand, there were all those stories about missionaries and cannibals...

"Uh...those creatures out there," he said tentatively. "Could you do a scan on them for me?"

"My exterior sensors have been on since we landed. I have ascertained that these are peaceful vegetarians, of a rudimentary intelligence probably on par with your own. They call themselves Snith, and they speak a simple language, easily analyzed. I have been feeding it into the VoCoder, which is ready for use should you decide to go out while I work."

"Vegetarians, eh?"

The teeth suggested they might not be, but the greens in the baskets made it look plausible, and out there was fresh air and a chance to stretch his legs. It was worth taking a chance. Impulsively, he snatched the VoCoder from its cubby, strapped it to his side,

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opened the hatch, and climbed boldly down the ladder to the ground.

The natives' reaction to his sudden appearance was unusual. Nonplussed but not frightened, they inspected him briefly and discussed him with each other. The VoCoder whispered a translation of their words into his ear in Galactic.

"Did you ever eat anything like that?" one of them was asking.

"Nobody ever ate anything like that. There is no such thing."

"If we haven't eaten it, it doesn't exist. You know that. Come on, come on! We'll be late for the ceremony if we don't hurry!"

As one, they wheeled and scampered off.

"Wait, fellows! I want to talk to you!" Murdoch called, but they paid no attention. Their indifference was a challenge he could not ignore, and he hurried after them. They sped out of the swampy forest onto a grassy plain and headed toward a quaint native village, Murdoch hot on their heels. Huts made of mud and leafy fronds encircled a central plaza in which a crowd was gathering and preparations being made for some Great Event. He slowed down and approached with caution, being unfamiliar with the local customs, and hovered on the outskirts of the throng. As more Snith arrived, he noticed with disapproval that although they were bringing their young, the infants were treated harshly, jostled along with many admonitory hisses and slaps. His heart was wrung with pity for the little ones, and when one of them ran up to stare at him with the wide, innocent eyes of childhood the universe over, he reached out to pat it kindly on the head.

It promptly sank its teeth into his hand.

Its parent rushed up, hissing like a steam radiator about to explode, disengaged it, and scrubbed its mouth out with sand.

"Bad, bad, *bad!* "the parent scolded, giving it a vigorous cuff on the side of the head that sent it spinning. Murdoch felt less pity for it now as he examined his wound and thought of rabies and possible infection, but the Snith did not apologize for its offspring's behavior—it scolded the victim.

"How *dare* you tempt him like that! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, leading a mere hatchling astray before his first Feeding of Elder, when you know perfectly well he'll snap at anything that's put in front of him!"

"The Feeding of the Elder! What a beautiful thought!" Murdoch exclaimed, transported. He forgot all about his hand. "Is that what the ceremony is? Can I watch?"

"Suit yourself," the Snith grumped. "It wouldn't hurt *you* any to partake as well, I'd say."

This tender concept made the scene before him seem to be bathed in a golden, sentimental glow. Such reverence for age was a rare and pre-

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cious thing, and it did his heart good to imagine all those rowdy brats bowing and handing choice tidbits to their seniors and being taught better manners as they did so.

Fruit and garlands of flowers piled in the center of the plaza marked the site of the festivities, and he recklessly elbowed his way into a good spot in the forefront of the crowd, where he could see everything.

He did not have long to wait. In a few minutes the older Snith pulled back and the young were pushed forward. A voice cried, "Let the Elder appear!"

A decrepit lizard, scaly hide green with moss, crawled out of a nearby hut and wobbled to the center of the plaza. It peered about with rheumy eyes, and the same voice went on: "Oh Atlatl, oldest and wisest of our Elders, you who are about to share your wisdom and knowledge with those newly hatched and ignorant, we salute you, we sing your praise and express our deepest gratitude!"

The crowd roared enthusiastically. The Elder nodded.

"I'm ready. Let's get it over with," it mumbled and lay down.

"Go!"

The little snith charged forward, screaming like demons, and flung themselves on the supine body of the old lizard. Stunned, Murdoch realized that with the permission—nay, overwhelming approval!—of their parents, the horrid little beasts were actually devouring a helpless senior citizen!

"STOP!" he thundered. "This barbarous custom must cease at once!"

The Snith gaped, dumfounded. Something about the way they were looking at him made Murdoch extremely nervous, but he knew his duty when he saw it, and it was obviously his duty to enlighten these benighted cannibals. It became equally obvious that they did not wish to be enlightened.

"Blasphemy!" one of them screamed. "Shred the blasphemer!"

The scales of those nearest him reddened. It occurred to him that it would be well to leave and to lose no time about it. Swiftly choosing the shortest way out, he sped forward, leaped over the prostrate body of the Elder, dove between the huts on the other side and was out on the savannah, running well. Angry Snith charged after him, and cries of "Shred the blasphemer!" spurred him on. Intent not so much on what lay ahead of him as on what was behind, he smashed head-first into a solid object that found itself in his path. It happened to be a tree, and he scurried up it like a squirrel, hoping the Snith could not do the same. Luckily, they weren't built for it. They could only mill around beneath him, glaring up and hissing.

An older Snith constituted itself spokesman and stepped forward.

"Why are you so unreasonable?" it called up angrily. "Come down at once and be shredded!"

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"Why?" Murdoch wailed. "What have I done?"

"You spoke against the Feeding of Elder! That's blasphemy! Blasphemers have to be torn into a thousand pieces, and each piece has to be buried separately in a remote spot so no one could possibly eat your revolting ideas. Suppose some unsuspecting hatchling should accidentally take a bite out of you and swallow such heresy? Stop the Feeding of Elder, indeed! That would destroy our whole civilization! How are the young to learn, except by incorporating the flesh of those older and wiser than themselves?"

Something Murdoch vaguely remembered from a biology course stirred in the back of his mind.

"Transfer of learning by ingestion!" he gasped, clinging even more tightly to his perch. That was supposed to occur in simple organisms like worms. He had never dreamed that a more complex animal could assimilate information in this fashion...but the universe was large, and its variations infinite. He looked at the lizards beneath him, and they gazed expectantly back. How was he to get out of this? He closed his eyes to pray for a miracle, and his concentration was shattered by a steam-whistle shriek.

"DRAGON!"

The Snith instantly froze exactly as they were, like children playing "Red Light"; and out of the underbrush thumped Tyrranosaurus Rex's somewhat younger brother—about twice as tall as the Snith, whom he much resembled. This monster ambled over to the paralyzed crowd, noted the direction of their gaze, looked up, and spotted Murdoch.

"Good heavens!" it cried, clutching its tiny forelimbs to its heart. "What's *that*?"

The Snith did not even blink. They might have been carved from stone. Murdoch scrambled higher up the tree.

"I'm Murdoch McMurdoch, from the Pan-Galactic Mission of Brotherhood to All Sentient Beings, and I'd like to talk to you about brotherly love," he quavered.

"I've never eaten anything like you."

It stretched to its full height to sniff at his boots, leaning against the tree, which swayed dangerously under its weight.

"I suppose you learn by ingestion, too," Murdoch remarked bitterly, tucking his feet up under him.

"Doesn't everybody?" it inquired, amazed.

"There *are* other ways."

"Oh, I know that—but ingestion's much the easiest. Which reminds me: I was just on my way to lunch. Isn't it nice to find such a good selection gathered here! It saves me a walk."

It left the tree and began to inspect the Snith, who kept on pretending they were features of the landscape.

"Wait! you're not going to eat one of *them*, are you? They're your brothers!"

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"You can't be serious. I've digested enough of them to know better than that." It probbed a potential entrée in the ribs, sniffed at it, and passed on to inspect another. The Snith still played Living Statues.

"Do they always hold still like that, and let you pick and choose among them?" Murdoch asked, incredulous.

"Sure. They think if they don't move, I can't see them. Poor fools! But it's very convenient for me."

"But they can *hear* you! They're listening right now! Aren't you afraid they'll turn on you and defend themselves?"

"They won't believe it. They only believe what they eat, and they're so narrow-minded about that—nothing but vegetables and the Elders—they'll never find out any different. The only Snith who realize I can see them are the ones *I* eat, and they don't get to be Elders." It chuckled contentedly and resumed its inspection of the menu. Murdoch was appalled.

"You're an intelligent sentient! How can you eat a fellow being, someone you can sit down and talk with? Look at them! They're just like you, only smaller! Why can't you be friends with them?

"It's true that mine is a lonely life," the dragon sighed, "but it's an easy one. And the Snith are so limited, intellectually. Now, a being like *you*, for instance—I can see having a nice chat with you. In fact, we *are* having a nice chat. Why not join me for a snack?"

"Never!" Murdoch cried passionately. "Listen to me! Let me soften your heart! *Love* the Snith! Learn to care or them! It's not fair to take advantage of their ignorance like this! It's —its *beneath* you! You're stronger and smarter than they are! Have you no compassion?—And you, Snith! Believe the evidence of your own eyes! Believe what you hear from the dragon's own mouth. He can see you! He said so! Run away! Save yourselves, and save him from sin!"

They didn't budge, and he lost his temper.

"Are you going to sit there like dummies and let that lazy bum make a free lunch out of you?" he shouted.

These hot words did produce a reaction. Here a scaly hide blushed pink; there a repressed hiss could be detected; in one eye or another a fierce light began to gleam. The dragon noted these usual manifestations and was indignant.

"What are you doing? Trying to spoil things for me?"

"I'm not spoiling things for you; I'm showing you a better life! It's *wrong* to eat Snith! Think how much you have in common! Think how wonderful it would be to live in harmony with them, to have dear friends with whom you can share your joys and sorrows, with whom to travel down life's pathway, each leaning on the other!"

"Eating vegetables as we go, I suppose," the dragon grunted sourly.

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"Look, you've got them all worked up!"

The Snith were indeed worked up. Several of them were visibly twitching, either as a result of Murdoch's speech or from the strain of remaining motionless so much longer than they were used to; and the soft hisses were increasing to geyser intensity.

"Hey!" the dragon exclaimed, alarmed. "I don't like the look of this! I'm getting out of here!"

And not a moment too soon. As he turned and ran, the Snith abandoned their rigid postures and pelted after him. He was large, heavy, and sluggish of habit; but his legs were long and his giant strides gave him a good lead. Murdoch watched until they were far away, slid down from the tree, and hit the ground running, heading for the safety of his ship. He zipped across the savannah and into the woods. As he soared from tussock to tussock through the swamp, he congratulated himself on his narrow escape...or had he escaped? The silence was disturbed by distant sounds of pursuit, which seemed to be drawing nearer. The jelly-like earth of the swamp began to tremble under the impact of the dragon's galloping footsteps. He glanced over his shoulder and was horrified to see the hunt rapidly overtaking him. The dragon was still in the lead, eyes bulging, steaming with effort; but the Snith were close behind, and they looked fresher.

"Oh, my!" he gasped. He had thought he was running at top speed before; now he discovered reserves he wouldn't have believed. He flew over the remaining distance to the ship, tore up the ladder and through the hatch, hurled himself on the acceleration couch, and screamed, "Take off! *Emergency!*"

"I cannot," the computer informed him. "There is a portion of sentient blocking the hatch."

He leaped up and spun around. The dragon, equally motivated, had been closer behind him than he knew. It had followed him up the ladder, forced its snout through the closing door like a commuter rushing the subway and was scrabbling frantically to widen the gap.

"Don't let it in!" Murdoch shouted.

"Huff-huff-huff!" the dragon panted. "Why—*huff*—not?" It scrabbled harder and managed to worm its head and shoulders inside, but its pear-like shape prevented it from intruding further, and it stuck there, leaning on its elbows and trying to catch its breath.

"For one thing, I'm leaving this world as soon as I can get the hatch closed," Murdoch told it sharply. "If you come in here, you'll never see your home again!"

"If the Snith catch up with me, I'll never see it again anyway."

"Where have they got to?" Murdoch asked, craning over the dragon's head. "The last time I saw them, they were right behind you."

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"Quicksand," it explained smugly. "I went around. They didn't."

"That's terrible!" Murdoch exclaimed, diverted by his Samaritan instincts. "We must save them!"

"Save *them?*" the dragon squealed, outraged. "What about *me? I'm* the one who needs to be saved! If they get their claws on me, they'll shred me! That patch of mud won't stop them, it'll only slow them down—" It cocked its head, listening. "In fact, I can hear them now! They're on their way! And in case you've forgotten, they're after you, too!"

He *had* forgotten. Once inside the ship, he had felt himself secure; but with the dragon blocking the hatch—

"OUT!" he bellowed. "Out, out, *out!*"

Heedless of its teeth, he put both hands on its nose and shoved. Unfortunately, as he pushed its head back, he came within reach of its forepaws. It grabbed him by the ankles.

"If I go, you go!"

"That's blackmail!" Murdoch cried, leaning on its head and trying to kick himself free.

"I don't know about blackmail," the dragon said, hanging on grimly. "Simple justice, is what I call it. This is all your fault. If you'd minded your own business, none of this would have happened!"

Murdoch was briefly tempted to argue the point, but a distant tally-ho proved that the dragon was right and at least some of the pursuers had struggled out of the mire and were hot on the trail again. He hesitated. Taking an unbeliever on board was against the rules, but an explanation on Caritas was a long way away, and the Snith were here. Very much here: even as he debated with himself, one of them burst out of the bushes, spotted the dragon's hindquarters, and uttered a ringing view-halloo as it launched itself forward. He still demurred.

"I can't let you in, you don't belong to the Brotherhood!"

Two more Snith appeared and started conferring with the first.

"I'll join! I'll join!" the dragon assured him fervently.

"Will you take the oath?"

One of the Snith took a measuring leap at the tail dangling overhead. It scratched off a couple of scales and gathered itself to try again. The dragon yelped and tightened its grip on Murdoch's ankles.

"If they get me, you go with me!"

Murdoch made a swift decision.

"Doyouswearthatyoubelievethatallliving beingsarecreatedfromthesameelementsanddoyouswear totreatthemallwiththeloveduethemasyourbrothers? he gabbled.

"I swear! Let me *in!*"

"Open the hatch!" Murdoch command the computer.

The door slid back and the dragon scuttled over him. From a prone position, Murdoch ordered, "Close the hatch!" and groaned to his feet, feeling

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Garry Kilworth is new to these pages, but he has published four SF novels, including IN SOLITARY and THE NIGHT OF KADAR (Avon). He writes: "Born in York, England in 1941. Raised in South Arabia, now settled with my wife and family in Shoeburyness, a village in SE England. Have been writing seriously since 1974 when I won the Gollancz/Sunday Times SF Story Competition. 'Lord of the Dance' was drafted while camping with my wife and kids near Thaxted during fertility-rite time in that area."

Lord of the Dance

BY
GARRY KILWORTH

'One should try everything once, except incest and folk dancing'
— Bax

I was a little annoyed with Denys. Spring Bank Holiday is never the best of times to be on the road, and she could have forewarned me of the festival by telephone. People blocked Thaxted streets for as far as I could see, and in the distance colorful figures bobbed ribboned straw hats above the heads of the crowd. There was the sound of accordion music mingling with the note of the car engine. I glanced at the dash — the motor was beginning to overheat. Looking round, I saw a stone church wall that was indented and decided to park the Lancia there and return for it at a later time — when the crowds had thinned. It was late afternoon and hot. Hopefully they would not last long into the evening.

Denys was to meet me at The Argus, a presumptuous inn that called itself a hotel. She had started out by train a day ahead of me on our annual tour of Essex. As I moved through the crowds, I saw that the straw boaters belonged to a group of English folk dancers and that there were many more such groups standing by, awaiting their turn to entertain the watchers. They were dressed similarly in multicolored waistcoats, ribbons fluttering from elbows and shinpads of bells. I noticed from the coaches that they came from various parts of the country — even from as far north as York. Some held sticks in their hands, others swords, and, more commonly, the white handkerchiefs associated with Morris dancers.

I found a cool side street free of ice-cream lickers and overdressed adults, and left them to the sound of clacking

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staves as six dancers weaved their way through a traditional number, jingling their leg bells and hopping in a clearly effeminate manner to the accompanying music. The street closed in around me as I walked over its shadowed cobbles. There were timber-framed overhanging houses interspersed with rows of dormered, gabled and color-washed cottages throughout Thaxted. The place had that comfortable, solid feeling of age. I loved to visit it, more especially since to reach it one had to drive through the similar market towns of Cutlers Green and Saffron Walden. Thaxted, however had a special significance for me.

It was not that I was overfond of 14th Century buildings but that the place was peppered with antique shops. I was a London market dealer, and my livelihood depended upon old ladies clearing their attics and small town dealers trading for less than city values. This particular weekend I had located an item I had been seeking for some time. There was a potential buyer on-hook requesting immediate purchase — a rich Arab apparently, and it was one of those rare, succulent name-any-price transactions.

To enter the Tudor-style Argus Hotel, I had to rejoin the main street once again, having circumnavigated the holiday-makers for a good part of the journey from the car. Humanity at its most ugly pressed against the pink walls and inset windows of the hotel. They were out in force: the trouser suspenders, the cardigans draped over shoulders, the chocolate smears around the mouths. There was even a street photographer, with a cheap Polaroid camera and a monkey, touting for business on the fringes of the mob. I hated them, not because they were a *crowd* but because they were a loose-jawed *circus mob*, and of course they were not looking for Sheffield plate or solid silver antiques. Weddings and christenings I adored because people bought antiques as gifts for such occasions. Funeral crowds I could tolerate — a death might lead to the unearthing and sale of family heirlooms. Circus crowds however were detestable, useless gatherings. The monkey hopped onto a child's shoulder, and the Polaroid came up instantly to the wearer's eye. I left them with a feeling of revulsion.

Denys was in the bar. I stopped to admire her from behind. Her blonde plaits — a recent acquisition — appeared to be tangible echoes of the corn dollies pinned to the dark beams above her head. She saw me in the mirror over the bar and smiled without turning round.

"A pint of bitter," she ordered from the barman, then to me: "You took your time. Trouble with the car?"

I sat upon the stool next to her, complaining. "You know damn well why I'm late. The populace is out on the streets."

"The Morris dancing — actually, I'd forgotten. You know I wouldn't do

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this on purpose. It can be quite fun, you know, if you allow it to be."

Her softly spoken admonishment was enough to melt any feelings of annoyance that I had carefully nursed from the moment of my arrival at Thaxted. They had to a certain extent been contrived in any case. I smiled with her.

"You're right. And the...."

"Yes. It's still there. I'll take you when you've fortified yourself with the local ale."

She sensed my impatience and added, "It'll *still* be there. I asked him to hold it with a five-pound note. Don't worry."

I tried to relax as the beer was pushed towards me and from the high bar stool looked out through the window over the heads of the people outside. A new set of Morris dancers was mincing in festive delight, brandishing double-handed swords, forming arches with them and tripping beneath with what I had to admit was skilful footwork. It just did not entertain me as it seemed to do others. All I saw was a bunch of blue-ribboned farmer's boys in sissy clothes acting out a silly fertility rite — albeit traditional. I sighed.

"They're forming the nut with the swords now," said Denys.

The dancers had locked all the blades together to form a pentangle. One man held it aloft.

"You're a nut," I replied and received the expected rap on the knuckles.

I stared sourly at the scene outside. I had always viewed men who enjoyed nonprofit-making hobbies with suspicion. They threw themselves into their chosen pastime with an energy I believed was wasted. That was not the whole story though. It was not them, but me that was the trouble. I had once considered taking flying lessons until I realized one had to make a ritual of the procedures. A religion. Actually *flying* the aircraft was a minor side-issue. What really counted were the numerous checks and re-checks on the serviceability of the machine; the correct completion of flight plans; the exact order of the instrument check; the knowledge of meteorology, navigation and radio communications.... Eventually I realized that taking up flying as a hobby was a full-time job. You had to eat, drink and sleep *flying*. There was nothing on this earth I liked enough to throw myself into so completely as that. Nothing that did not pay.

"Shall we go now?" Denys was on her feet. I admired her tall, upright body as she moved towards the door. Our affair was past tense and it had not altogether been a success. Perhaps if one of us had billed the other for the service, it might have been different? I am, I suppose, a natural cynic. Still, for some reason we made the work an excuse to stay together. She remained my partner in business, if not in bed. Denys dealt with the art and I with the age.

We went out onto the packed pave-

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ments. Denys led me through sightseers and past grim, sweating dancers to the end of the main street. On the corner, opposite the church but on the far side from where I had left my car, was a black-framed antique shop. A bell tinkled as we entered. A few moments later a small faded man of indeterminate middle age came gliding from the dark cloisters at the rear. He saw Denys and smiled.

"The astrolabe?" he said, but there was no need to reply. From a drawer behind his desk he took an object the size of a small saucer. I could see from the way he handled it that it was heavy. It was swathed in tissue which he unwrapped slowly. I stared through his thin hair at the skull as he bent his head over his task.

He placed the astrolabe in my hand.

When one usually talks of a "sixth sense," it is more often than not with a primitive warning of imminent danger in mind. An instinct. The legendary detective has a sixth sense which urges him to turn at the point when the villain's club is descending from behind. I have such a sense, but it is not in the form of a mental telemetry device — it is a talent most useful to my profession. *I can sense age.* Moreover, it appears to have a rejuvenating effect on me, as if my own years flow into the object, aging it further and leaving me in hidden youth.

It was this strangeness about myself which attracted me to Thaxted. There were others like me, somewhere in the town. I could sense their presence. I had the idea that there was a colony of people like me that had collected in the area, possibly over a number of years. It was not something I could speak to others about, although I had almost blurted my secret to Denys once when she showed me a poem of which she was fond. The poem was almost like a sign telling me that I was not alone in the world. The last four lines were particularly interesting. They read:

"The blast again, ho, ho, the blast!
I go to a mansion that will outlast
And the stoled priest that steps before
Shall turn and welcome me at the door."

It concerned the funeral of a wizard, and I knew I had something of the magician in me. I interpreted the lines to mean that people like myself had a special afterlife, where we would all meet and know one another — know ourselves for what we were.

The astrolabe was old, very old. My palm held centuries of secrets. I could feel the darkness and weight of many wars and long journeys. Moreover, and more practically, it was manufactured of bronze. The instrument consisted of two circular rings arranged as in an armillary sphere. The center plate was decorated with star patterns and planets, and there were several moving parts known as the horse, mater, rete and alidade. An astrolabe is the forerunner of a sextant and was originally used to measure the

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altitude of a heavenly body. It was developed in Ancient Greece but was, in the 15th Century, adopted by navigators for determining latitude. The "sighter" looks along a pointer pivoted across a vertical disk marked off in degrees of a circle. Moslems use them to determine *gibla* — the direction to face in prayer. There is a story that Herod sent an expert navigator after the Magi, but that while the agent of the king was taking a sighting with the astrolabe, a star suddenly exploded into brilliance and blinded him.

It was a beautiful object and, I guessed, pre-Christ. Egyptian or Greek. Or possibly Phoenecian. I shrugged my shoulders unenthusiastically.

"It's not the type I was looking for but I can probably find a client. How does a hundred and fifty suit you?"

He relieved me of the object, temporarily, and the haggling began and finally settled at 250 pounds. I was happy. My client had promised a great deal more for such an item.

We left the dealer and set about fighting our way back to the hotel. In the center of Thaxted is the guildhall, a 15th Century building of timber-shorn wattle-and-daub. The crowd had thickened, and after one or two attempts to work our way through Denys said, "Let's wander around the hall for half an hour. They *must* be going home soon."

I agreed. The guildhall was now a museum. Perhaps I would learn something about the townspeople there? We paid a small sum at the door and climbed a cool, wooden stairway to sanity above.

However, even in the small museum we were unable to escape completely the influence of the folk dancers in the street below. Anticipating an expansive interest in Thaxted's spring festival, the museum authority had arranged a display of costumes and accoutrements relating to Morris dancing. There were also photographs and several paintings of past dancers and their moments of glory. Some of the faded plates had been taken in the late eighteen-hundreds. The paintings went further back. Morris dancing apparently had its origins in pre-Christian Saxon England. In those times (I read) the dance consisted of six men, one of whom wore girl's clothing. There was usually a "fool" that struck the dancers — and spectators — with an inflated pig's bladder tied to a stick.

Not much had changed since the early days except that the male "lady" no longer appeared in the dance and, of course, the intention of the dance had become somewhat diverted. Fertility was not foremost of the participants' concerns, but entertainment.

"Interested?" asked Denys.

"Funnily enough, I am," I said. "These things have a way of reaching out and grabbing your attention."

I moved around the room and finally came upon a large painting hanging over an open fireplace. The picture

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was heavily lacquered, which gave it a dark, brooding atmosphere, and the paint beneath the varnish had cracked into an intricate, crazy mosaic. Close to, the figures were lost in the intermingling dull brown background and surface shine. Stepping back, I could vaguely make out six figures dressed in monkish garb and wearing reindeer horns. A seventh person stood apart from the rest. He was playing a fiddle. It was a faintly sinister scene, and I wondered why this should be so: why it disturbed me.

"Is this the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance?" I asked Denys, for although I had heard of the dance, she was much better informed than I on such matters.

She came and stood by me, studying the picture for a moment.

"No, I don't think so. The Bromley dancers wear Tudor dress and their horns haven't left the parish since the Anglo-Saxon period. Abbots Bromley is in Staffordshire," she explained. "Not Essex. Also it's to commemorate the granting of hunting rights in Needwood Forest and isn't performed until September."

Even I was surprised at the glibness of her reply, and she cocked her head to a corner of the room, confessing:

"I just read it all over there. You can see by the picture that this one was performed in Thaxted. That's the guildhall behind them."

I stared harder and realized she was right. It was Thaxted. Was this dance going to take place today? If so I wanted to see it. There was a fine quality of age about the picture that aroused my curiosity, and despite the numerous warning notices I touched the canvas. The effect was startling and I withdrew my hand quickly. It was as if my whole body had received a charge of undiluted malevolence.

"Naughty," said Denys, referring to my trespass.

"God, this one is very...." I stumbled over the word.

"Old?"

"Not just old — something else." A trace of evil? It must have been apparent in my tone because Denys gave a short, nervous laugh.

"Now you're trying to frighten me. Come on, let's go and have a drink. Out in a pub garden preferably, where there's a bit of sunshine and light...."

"Coward," I replied, but though I tried for banter, there was a tremor to my voice. I continued to study the painting, tried to capture one of the faces of the dancers in my mind, but either the light was too poor or the shades too dense. I could only make out individual features, such as a nose, or a cheek, or a set of ringed eyes, but not one of the portraits was clear enough to distinguish a full face. They were clouded features: not deliberately screened by hoods or limbs but obscured by hazy shadows. If I moved my line of sight, the shadows appeared to move with me. Thwarting my intention. The only unusualness about them was a silvery sheen under the eyes and

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on the nostril ducts. A whiteness where one normally found dark shadow. By moving my angle of sight I managed to pick out these individual characteristics. Of the seven figures, two were full and both had this peculiarity.

I followed Denys down the stairway, but before I had left the painting, something had attracted my attention. There had been a small, oval title plate which I had previously missed, possibly due to the fact that it blended with the heavy gilt frame.

The plate had read: *Danse Macabre.* The dance of death. Beneath that, a date: *1603.*

Societies and cultures throughout history have used the power of the dance for many reasons. More than just a form of expression, it is also a heavy intoxicating agent and has been employed as such for war, love mysticism, magic, illness and death. Polynesians say hello and goodbye with a dance. Modern youth uses the dance to express contempt and rebellion. As a drug it can be as potent as heroin and the addict more manipulative. A dance might be the result of methodical calculations, or it might arise suddenly from obscure and mysterious origins to meet a situation such as the defeated Sioux's *Ghost Dance.*

My knowledge of dances was broadbased, not specific. I knew little about the *danse macabre* and I connected it loosely with visions of jigging skeletons. I mentioned it to Denys as I caught up with her.

"It has psychopathological connotations," she said at once.

"What?" I blinked rapidly.

She stared at me as if I were a simpleton.

"It's pathogenic. You can even kill people with it, providing the beliefs are deep-rooted enough — or so I understand," she added hastily as she saw the expression I was forming.

"Let's get a program," I suggested.

We went out into the sunlight, and there the nefarious atmosphere of the museum left me. It was difficult to retain a mood of black magic with lighthearted holiday-makers elbowing my ribs.

There was a Horn Dance on the program, scheduled for midnight. We could probably see it from the windows of The Argus, since most of the people would have gone home by that time.

I put my arm around Denys to steer her through the crowd, and the contact brought with it a wave of nostalgia. I was still very fond of her but had foolishly allowed her to slip away from me. I now regretted that immersion in work which had been responsible for my neglect of our love affair. A couple of younger men had come and gone since then, and I was too afraid of rejection to try again.

The astrolabe banged heavily against my hip as I walked. I reflected that the instrument could have belonged to one of those dancers in the picture. It was of a similar age. I dismissed

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it as too much of a coincidence.

Over dinner, later in the evening, Denys said to me, "This gift you have for judging age in objects — is it ... real?"

"Don't worry," I replied frivolously. "It doesn't work on people." Then, seeing she was serious, I added, "Depends what you mean by *real*. It's only a feeling, you know — not something I could put a name to."

"No, you misunderstand me. I mean, you don't put it on — for effect? To give yourself a touch of mystique?"

I was a little offended. "Certainly not. You've seen it work in the past. I've usually been fairly accurate, haven't I?"

"Yes, but that could be luck. A good guess. Or perhaps your knowledge of the artifacts is more extensive than you prefer to reveal."

"I wouldn't do that with you. Possibly with a client or another dealer, but not with you. No, if you want me to take a stab at a phrase, I'd call it depth of perception. Everyone can perceive age to a certain degree — my gift, as you call it, is intrinsic, believe me. It's just more intense than that of others. Why?"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "I didn't want you to keep fooling me — if that's what you were doing. Now I'm sorry I mistrusted you."

I tried to look hurt but changed the subject.

"I like your dress," I said. "Is it new?"

She seemed grateful that I had let her off the hook and said, "Yes," at the same time adjusting the bodice a little.

The dress was low-cut and exposed a spray of those freckles which had fascinated me for as long as I had known her. She saw me staring.

"You don't think its too revealing?" she asked with a crestfallen look.

I shook my head. "Not at all. It shows enough of you to whet the appetite of the other males in the room, yet tells them you're spoken for."

"Spoken for? Am I?" she smiled, warmly.

I mumbled something which was inaudible to her when there was a stir of excitement around the windows. Other o. ers were looking out at the dancing, which was still in progress although the crowds had thinned until only a narrow ribbon of onlookers remained. Most of these would be tourists, gently ejected from the closing public houses a few moments before. They stood in knots under the cones of light beneath the street lamps, eating pies or finishing the remains of a pint of beer. They sounded far more cheery than I felt, and I excused myself, saying I was going to get an early bed. Denys looked a little disappointed but nodded and rose. I took her to her room, pecked her cheek and wished her good-night.

Once in my own room, which was on the first floor, I undressed and lay

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on my bed, hoping to fall asleep quickly. However, the room faced the street, and the accordion music proved difficult to keep out of my head. It demanded my attention. For a short time however, I must have dozed.

I awoke abruptly to a stillness which disturbed me, and I realized after a moment that the silence must have triggered my state of awareness. The accordion music had stopped. But then something began to take its place, a different kind of music. It was no longer a bouncing, tripping time but a slow, intricate melody that was not melodious. A pibroch, spontaneous and distantly melancholy. A dirge played, if I was not mistaken, on a fiddle.

I went up to the leaded window and looked down. There was only a small handful of onlookers left outside, one of them being the street photographer with his monkey sitting on his shoulder. He was preparing to take a flash of the horn dancers. The *danse macabre!* I had forgotten about it until that moment.

There were nine dancers, an incorrect number for a Morris dance, dressed in monks' habits and carrying short poles topped with antlers. Two more than the picture in the guildhall had showed. They held the staves in front of their faces so that the horns appeared to spring from their foreheads. Shadows danced around the openings to the hoods. The ninth man, the fool playing the violin, was dressed as a priest. For a moment his garb shocked me, though I wasn't sure why. I am not in the least bit religious. I could see the miter on the back of his head dipping in time to the eerie cadence of his music. The dancers weaved in and out of one another as if they were threading a mystic figure in the dim light of the lamps which the watchers were supposed to recognize. The earlier jollity had gone from the audience and had been replaced by solemnity.

One of the eight held an open black umbrella over the fiddler, hiding his face in shadow. It was not raining — on the contrary the night was sultry — and this scene should have been humorous. Instead, it struck me as sinister, though I did not understand why.

The music though weird was compelling and I opened the window almost without thinking, to hear it more clearly. It filled my room with its dismal sound and I experienced a familiar feeling. Or was it the same? I looked down instinctively to see if I picked up the astrolabe unknowingly.

My hand was empty. Yet the feeling persisted. Not the same, but similar. Quickly I shut the window, my sensitivity protected by the leaded glass.

They *were* here then! I sat down on the bed, my hands trembling in my lap. There was a choice to make. I could stay in Thaxted until they contacted me, or I could get in my car and drive. What was I afraid of? I had come on my own accord. They didn't

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even know I was here.

Or did they? My glance fell on the astrolabe that glinted from the table like a cyclops' eye, watching my deliberations. How had I heard about it? The typewritten postcard that had a Thaxted postmark I had assumed came from the antique dealer. And my dealings with the buyer had been through postal communications. I picked up the heavy disks of metal, smooth as silk with use. Was it one of theirs? Constellations etched upon its plates murmured through my sensitive fingers. Secrets. Secrets.

The telephone buzzed, making me start. I let it ring twice before putting down the astrolabe and lifting the receiver.

"Yes?"

The voice was low and guttural. "The church." Then the line buzzed. Whoever it was had hung up. The music was still filling the room from the outside, faintly persistent. I looked out again and counted the dancers. Seven besides the fool. One was missing.

I waited for about twenty minutes, until the music stopped. Then I began to dress.

Perhaps I was overreacting but I didn't stop to think too hard. I followed my instincts, a natural bent with me. After all, I had no one I need answer to. As I passed Denys' room, she was entering it, presumably having been to the bathroom at the end of the hall.

"Where are you going?" she asked in a surprised tone of voice.

"I just ... I wanted to take a walk?"

She looked down at my hands. I was clutching my shoes.

"Are you mad?" she hissed. "It's gone midnight."

For once I felt she was right about me. I *was* mad but I was also curiously frightened.

"Look, Denys, I don't know why but I'm worried about ... well something just happened to me which I can't explain. Please, *indulge* me if you think I'm crazy."

Her eyes softened.

"Will you explain later?"

"If I can," I said. I pulled on my shoes. "Look. I'll be back soon. Wait in my room for me. I just want to look around."

She nodded, though she still looked concerned. I couldn't blame her. Something had entered my life which I knew was highly portentous, but I could not explain why, even to myself. I just knew that Thaxted held something for me and I had felt its influence swamping my senses.

I left by the back of the hotel and made my way along the narrow street towards the church. It meant I had to navigate the midnight-filled alleys. I had no choice however.

With my heart pounding in my chest I walked quickly through the blackness of the Thaxted hinterland. The music was still in my head and with it that unwelcome feeling of being

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influenced against my desires. Why was I so suspicious? I wasn't entirely sure except that there *had* been a threat of menace in the music which I was unable to identify — at least, not clearly. Perhaps because I was part of it: an undeveloped version of those dancers?

I had started to cross the main street when the thing came hurtling out of the night to clamp itself on my thigh. It clung there, gibbering, and I screamed out in terror. I tried to swipe the demon to the ground but only glanced it, and its claws dug deeper into my leg. Although I had no wish to see it, I staggered blindly under a street light, almost swooning with the fear that had engulfed me.

It was a monkey — the photographer's animal — its small body shivered nervously against my own, teeth chattering some message of its own fear which was lost on my human ears. Its left arm was entangled with a pair of straps: one attached to a money satchel, the other to the photographer's Polaroid camera. The camera itself was battered and broken, having been dragged along cobbled streets.

As I tried, still shaking, to peel away the poor creature's limbs, it dropped suddenly to the ground. The camera broke into two or three pieces and lay at my feet. The animal itself scuttled off into the darkness, leaving behind the purse.

Slowly I bent down and picked up the pieces of the Polaroid. Where was the photographer? Had his monkey escaped? It had not been chained or roped in any case. Perhaps something had frightened it and it had run away from its master? Perhaps it, too, had felt the menace of that music — a creature more sensitive than a civilized human.

The camera was ruined. I poked a finger into the remains and found a damp piece of card. A photograph? I pulled the picture from its slot. The surface was shining with fluid. It had obviously not long been taken, and the owner had not had time to remove it before ... before what? Before the monkey had made a mad, unpredictable dash into the night?

I studied the photograph.

The flash had illuminated two of the faces beneath the hoods, and though it would be wrong to say that I recognized them, they did register immediately. Both had that silvery sheen below the eyes and nostrils. I connected them at once with the painting in the guildhall. There was no doubt in my mind whatsoever that they were the same people. *But the painting was several hundred years old!*

I stared at the two faces, seeing them complete for the first time. The expressions were ... intransigent. There was really no other word which would have fitted. Then I realized there was a third, in the background, between the other two, which had not been previously apparent to me in the poor light. It was like no other face I had ever seen before, and inside I felt

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as cold as death. How can I describe it? Warped? Twisted? It was as if one was viewing the features through imperfect bottle-glass. They were elongated and spiraled into a barely recognizable caricature of a human face. And inherent in that visage was an ancient and long-wielded *power*.

Here was the lord of the dance: the fool in priest's clothing.

I let the photograph fall to the street and walked quickly to where the car was parked against the church wall. Turning in my head were the lines of Denys' poem:

"The blast again, ho, ho, the blast!
I go to a mansion that shall outlast."

I knew now what those lines meant, though I had misinterpreted them before. Like all good poems, "The Wizard's Funeral" was oracular. I had previously taken the simple, most obvious meaning: that the wizard was going to an afterlife. Now the import of the words struck a more chilling chord: the *mansion* was not heaven or hell, or any spiritual house. It was the wizard's rejuvenated body. Not life after death, but life after life.

And the *blast* was not a hot wind coming from another world, it was the sudden excretion of age, like a wave of air rushing outwards, to be absorbed by unsuspecting onlookers.

"And the stoled priest who steps before
Shall turn and welcome me at the door."

The fool of the dance. But they needed a medium to permit the flow of age.

The medium was music — an ancient music, older than Christianity, older perhaps than Man. I had felt the blast in my room, standing at the open window. The *danse macabre* was not a dance of death but an annual dance of rebirth. A ritual necessary for the perpetration of a species of a race beyond my present understanding, but a race of which I was, or could be, a member.

Was that what I was? Was that what I wanted to be? Each spring to return to dance at Thaxted amongst tourists and villagers, who would absorb a year of my age into their unsuspecting bones? The skeleton ages, the flesh withers, but who among them would perceive a single, additional year? Each year, the ritual dance. Centuries of years passed on to changing audiences. Most of the villagers would bother to watch the dance only a few times during their lives. Midnight is late for the old to be out. Hardy young men from public house bars and possibly their girlfriends would form the main knot of the watchers. Families with children allowed to remain up after their normal bedtimes — they would be there. And afterwards? I would creep away with my fellow dancers, to live another quiet, stolen year on a farm, or in cottage lodgings, making no ripples in the community that closets me. Moving often from village to village, I would avoid becoming

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a subject for curious rumor-mongers.

Just living, living, living endless grey days.

I would be able to permit no accidents. My body would be more precious than a star. Nothing more than quiet walks, meetings in inns with my ancient fellow wizards: old eyes staring into old eyes. Did I want a face of bottle-glass? Lines in my brow deeper than knife grooves in the trunk of a thousand-year-old yew? Dust in my hollow bones older than the crumbling gravestones of the dead? There would be murders when humans stumbled too close to truth. Protection of eternal life would become a ruthless occupation, a necessary task of evil sages.

Did I want to exchange Denys for a group of wizened Ancients that coughed foul secrets into my ear? Did I want to replace her companionship with that of ugly contemporaries who thwart the natural onrush of death?

My God, I did not.

My hands were trembling as I fumbled for the car keys. For a terrible moment I thought I had forgotten them. Then I had them in my hand and was soon sitting behind the wheel. As the engine coughed to life, I caught a glimpse of someone on the far side of the churchyard. A figure moving quickly, head down, behind the stone wall. I drove the Lancia out into the street, the wheels shrieking as I overaccelerated in my haste to get to The Argus. Outside the hotel the streets were now empty.

I jumped out quickly and ran around the back where I had left the door unlocked. My skull had a numb feeling as a single thought pressed against its walls: *was Denys still safe?*

She was not in her room. I almost screamed for the second time that night. Then I heard a sound along the corridor and went quickly to my own room. Denys was there, lying on my bed. She looked up at me sharply as I grabbed her wrist.

"We have to leave," I said. "Some people are after me. I can't explain now but we're in danger."

There was an urgency to my voice, but I was calmer now that she was with me. She looked into my face, which must have reflected my fears.

"But ... all right," she said.

I threw her a pair of my slacks and a sweater. When she had them on, we descended the stairs, swiftly, but I felt I had control of myself now. Someone called from one of the other rooms, possibly the landlord's. We ignored it. The motor was still running as we scrambled into the car, and I pulled away smoothly from the curb, without the squeal this time.

"God...." began Denys, but I said, "Wait. Not yet," and she shut up immediately.

The town seemed deserted until we reached the outskirts, where a solitary figure stood in the center of the road. Leaning forward, Denys said, "It's the police."

I pressed my foot instinctively on

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the brake and prepared to stop.

Then something, a small internal warning, made me flick the headlamp switch. The full beams came on and illuminated the policeman's face. There was a reflection: facial patches of snail tracings I now knew and feared.

I rammed my foot onto the accelerator and we swept past him, brushing him with the side of the car and spinning him off his feet. I didn't even pause to look in the rearview mirror. I felt Denys' eyes on me, and I gave her a sideways look before concentrating on the road ahead.

Soon we reached a main highway. I heard a click and glanced down to see something in Denys' hands.

"The astrolabe," she said. "After all, that's what we went to Thaxted for. You didn't want to leave it behind, did you?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head. I had left something else behind.

I wondered what she would say if I told her I had traded her company for eternity.

The car sped on towards London.

(from page 41)

sightful context; I'd keep him alive through his seriously considered work.

And in the bargain I'd sublimate my own talent. I'd spend a part of every day living with Jimmy. I'd hear his voice and finally start writing the way he did. And if I ever ever ever figured out what it was I knew about him that made all of his life a lie, I'd keep it to myself till the cancer killed me, too.

And at last I know the nature of our friendship.

Say goodbye to Laurence Kercher O.J. Bedloe.

(from page 57)

for broken bones.

"Course plotted," the computer announced. "But I cannot take off with an unauthorized life form aboard."

Murdoch looked at the dragon, crouched on the floor, gaping at its unfamiliar surroundings; and a broad grin lit up his face.

"That's not an unauthorized life form," he beamed, swelling with pride. "That's my first convert! On to Caritas!"

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Bill Doxey writes: "I'm 44, married with three kids — from 18 to 5 years of age. Got a PhD in American Lit from the University of North Carolina, am now professor of English at West Georgia College. I've published in Galaxy, Esquire, Sat Eve Post, Atlantic, Playboy. *Do a lot of running — am over half-way around the world without leaving this county."*

Rheemann's Space

BY

WILLIAM S. DOXEY

The altimeter, on his wrist, a buzz.

He slowed his pace and pulled to the side of the path and glanced at the dial between the compass and chronometer.

Elevation: 836 meters.

Time: 16.3 hours.

Direction: 218 degrees.

On course, on time, on mark.

Now he touched the breaker under his left arm. His legs eased to a slower walk and he waited for the chief's voice.

In the mountains, he noticed, there was a certain beauty. Perhaps this fact accounted for the well-used appearance of the path. And the animal droppings. He reviewed the history of the territory as it had been given to him while he ran the kilometers from Bondeen on the estuary:

Area opened after the advent of lighter-than-air ships, with result that cities were not necessarily located on pre-existing trade routes — such as navigable waterways — or on straight-line projections spaced for refueling of railway locomotives ... highways as such not necessary ... but paths did exist for those wishing to travel via foot or animal transport ... main city of Ramur founded in high valley famous for health-giving mineral springs ... Salem and Donora in desert where vast supply of helium needed for lighter-than-air ships mined ... other cities of note —

"Now hear this, Rheemann, and hear it well."

The chief's voice coming through loud and clear over the tape-play feeding into his right ear.

He listened.

"...mission to Ramur for purpose of discovering and apprehending or

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neutralizing criminal involved in at least three and perhaps seven armed robberies ... suggest caution as bandit has demonstrated lack of concern for human life ... eyewitness description: average height and weight and build, brown hair, green eyes, no scars or other distinguishing marks ... usually wears one-piece lightweight suits of pastel shade with matching shoes and cap ... weapon used identified as Dumbler 2.7 high-velocity with freon bullets ... has been known to abuse bank employees ... details to follow ... you are completely on your own, Rheemann, completely undercover ... good luck...."

Rheemann loped down the path and entered a long stretch clear of trees and overhanging rocks where the sun was bright. He felt the cells implanted in his scalp absorb the solar energy, and he knew that even as he maintained his steady pace, minute wires laid underneath his skin were directing this energy into a pair of small but potent batteries positioned below his kidneys. From there the current passed through a series of capacitators and then a panel of shunts which directed it via more fine wires into the major muscles of his body where the electricity stimulated the metabolism of gluco-saturates being supplied by an addendum to the liver reacting to stimuli to the adrenal cortex.

The great muscles of his legs moved without his having to order them. From the waist up it was as though he rode upon a machine — and the machine was himself. Cardiovascular monitors were interspliced to an input jack feeding his left ear. By shifting the position of his jaw so that certain teeth lined up, he could determine his pulse and respiration rates, his blood pressure and body temp. Should any of these be beyond established parameters, it was only a simple matter of using the biofeedback apparatus to bring them on line.

As he ran through the sun he observed his shadow. He was 1.83 meters tall and weighed 82 kilos, equipped as he was for this assignment — that was strip-weight, which did not include the small pack on his back carrying a liter of water and a kilo of Pro-Snac, the high-energy food supplement created in response to the chief's request. He also carried a few personal items — a novel he hadn't read (it was titled *Borg Slavitt's Thirty Nights on Mt. Rollwell*, or something like that — maybe he would read it, or have a summary piped in, though novels of that type in general did not hold his interest for long — too many dreams and symbols, and usually they ended up being linguistic exercises calculated to examine what one could know and how which demonstrated there was little to be known and no way of knowing how it was — in fact —)

He spotted a ditch across the path and felt his sensors transmit this information to his legs, which triggered a

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demand for adrenalin. He braced for the sweet shock and felt his scalp burn as the juice gushed into his system causing his legs to double their strength and to bound ten meters through the air to clear the ditch without breaking stride. But the jolt of adrenalin was not without its usual pleasing side-effect. It was like bombs going off behind his eyes. He heard haunting music, which he knew wasn't coming through his receivers but rather was being generated by the surge of electrical energy in his own system. And he had an erection. Thank God his attire was of flexible material, else running like this in this condition, he might seriously injure himself and — well — was it coming to this — was he to ejaculate?

A pleasant enough experience which, in fact, did at times occur spontaneously for no apparent reason, although those who maintained his systems indicated it was a spin-off from the melding of man with nonhuman parts. A sort of flux was created by the infusion of two types of forces, which they knew existed but which they actually could not yet isolate, for when they effected a separation, both forces ceased. To avoid the embarrassment, this unexpected and unannounced phenomenon might well cause, they built into the capacitors a cut-off switch feeding to a fine wire planted deep in the brain. By twisting his left ear vigorously, Rheemann was able to induce orgasm, which — of course — the technicians viewed not in sexual terms but rather as a fail-safe drain-off of recumbent energy. To avoid loss of vital male hormone factors, they developed a testicular by-pass which automatically recycled ejaculant material and made possible — in theory, at least — a virtually limitless orgasmic vector. By twisting his ear and holding it twisted, Rheeman might set sail on that bright sea whose waters laved care from the world and succored parched souls —

Yes, again, and now the shunts took over and Rheemann made his return to the mundane, sensing a freshness in the mountain air he had not noticed.

Stride after powerful stride his mighty legs carried him along, his arms swinging lightly to provide balance, as he considered his assignment. Armed robbery was a dangerous undertaking, but he knew from years of training that many criminals sought danger for the kicks it gave. "Hype-freaks of the worst sort," the chief called them during his lectures. "Motivated by thrills; satisfied by nothing less than that hot-shot of nerve between the eyes that means raw power, the power of life and death!"

Rheeman smiled. The chief was a good performer — but then he was the chief. Ah, those blessed days at the Academy of Animal Syncopation, which was the cover name of the police school. A three-story rose-colored building of stucco and ornamental tile beyond the city limits of Bondeen, near

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the tidal pools where the chief raised his famous conchs. Yes, and the simian cages on the left lawn, the hippodrome to the rear, and the reptilium on the right lawn.

Yes, yes, indeed, the Academy of Animal Syncopation was famous in its own right, and justly so, for the professional staff who provided cover were in fact trained animal syncopationists who supplied the planet's circuses with creatures guaranteed to move with verve and grace.

But the chief and his lectures in the police school hidden beneath the basement: "We are hiding, or so it seems, for a purpose," he said, the first day of class. "And our purpose is, as always, to gain an understanding of the criminal mind. Criminals — need I point out — spend most of their free time hiding out. Hiding out is, therefore, a criminal activity and, as such, is grist for our mill, to coin a phrase." He went on: "You will notice that these rooms are drafty and poorly illuminated. There is water seeping through the floor. And something smells less than fresh. Have you considered what all this means?"

Rheeman recalled that someone had thrust a hand in the air, but the chief ignored the gesture and said, "As a matter of fact, all of this does not mean we cannot afford better quarters. The police are respected by the government, as you know. But what this filthy place means is that we are attempting always to give our students the best possible instructions, for you see —" he smiled "— we have accurately copied the typical criminal hideout!"

A stroke of genius. To a man and woman, the class rose and cheered.

"Rah!" said Rheemann under his breath as he ran.

With a chief like that pointing the way, how could he possibly fail?

The voice was that of an old woman.

Rheemann turned down the power to his legs and squinted into the afternoon sun. He had come to a wide stream. A few rocks were visible in the middle of the swirling water, and there was a good chance he could leap to them and thence to the other side. If worst came, he could swim across. But he noticed a metal cable running two or three meters above the stream. It was fastened on the near side to an eye screwed into a boulder. On the far side it was hitched around a tall tree.

From a cave of shadows beyond this tree came the voice, crying out again: "And what will you pay to cross, stranger?"

Rheemann was not without funds. The police — both overt and covert — were well-paid and received generous expense accounts. "A well-paid policeman," said the chief, "is a happy policeman! And a happy policeman is a good policeman!"

Still, money was power, and it was foolish to dissipate it unnecessarily.

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Speaking into the shadows, Rheeman said, "I'm nothing but a poor fellow, down on my luck, bound for Ramur to seek my fortune." He remembered his knapsack. He carried several packs of chewing gum — unknown to the chief, of course, for he maintained that in fighting crime it was dangerous to be doing more than one thing at a time.

The voice laughed. "I've heard that one before!"

"However," said Rheemann, reaching into his pack, "I do have a pack of gum."

Now in the shadows a face appeared, and then the sparkle of something reflecting light. Rheemann pushed the tip of his nose to activate the magnofocus system built around the socket of his right eye. There was a blur, then a zoom as a servomechanism adjusted the hyper-lens. He could count the ants crawling up the trunk of the tree across the stream, and he could also look into the binoculars of the keeper of the cable. A smile appeared below the glimmering lens, and she said, "Oh, it's you again! Why didn't you say so? Come on over!"

With that she tripped a switch, and a harness sped across the cable. Rheemann slipped into it and was transported over the water.

The woman did not appear to be as old as her voice indicated. But then he remembered the chief's lecture on voices, which made much of the fact that voices could be confusing. "And I don't mean those speaking a language you don't comprehend," he said. "Granted, they are a bit tricky. But so too are those of persons of your own tongue. One's voice changes with the years and the amount of speaking one does."

The woman smiled at him and said, "Those stockings were very nice, see?"

She raised her skirt to her hip and stuck out a semi-shapely leg.

"And so are the undies, see?"

She turned around and gave her skirt a careless upward flip of the same style as that done by exotic dancers in clubs where criminals gathered to formulate their schemes. The chief delivered four lectures on that subject and made his points more vividly by using photos and films and even bringing in a dancer for the edification of the class.

Rheemann nodded. She said, "Watcha got this time?"

He showed her the gum. She said, "Sugar-free, huh? Well, that's something, all right. Protect the old ivories." She made a big smile. Her teeth dazzled.

"But what I really need is — look — a bra!"

Rheemann looked. The female body was not unknown to him, and he ascertained that the bosom of the cable-keeper, while shapely, might well profit from a supportive garment.

She said, "A 42-D. Can you remember, or shall I write it down?"

* * *

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Ramur is a city within a city at whose glorious center is an open space given over to native stone, trees, lakes and bright streams. Around this park rise towers which service the silent lighter-than-air passenger ships. Ringing the edge of the city are other towers used by freight-haulers.

Transportation within the city is limited to pedal-craft, which are licensed according to number of wheels and type of motive power. Children and a few daring adults find joy in riding unicycles, some equipped with high seats enabling the operators to peer into second- and third-story windows. Two-wheelers are extremely popular, especially one model outfitted with two seats in-line; the rear seat is taken by a trained simian who provides sufficient leg-power to roll it and its human passenger, who takes the front seat and steers, at a good clip. Tri- and quad-cycles are not uncommon, especially among the older citizens. The moving of large cargoes about the city — for the supplying of stores, the removal of trash, the fighting of fires, etc. — is accomplished via huge, multi-wheeled machines called "galley-bikes" which are powered by banks of pedalers drawn from the ranks of convicted criminals. Since Ramur was carefully laid out upon a leveled plain, hills are not a problem; and since the city is roofed over with a semipermeable membrane — provided with locks for ingress and egress of airships — inclement weather does not interrupt transportation. And on those few days each month when rain is allowed to penetrate the membrane, traffic makes use of under-surface streets.

Rheemann entered Ramur through the south gate and, walking now to avoid calling attention to himself, proceeded to follow the spiral avenue which was the only street in the city. He kept to the central walk to avoid cycle traffic and also to study the shop windows and thus to appear an ordinary inhabitant out for a stroll and a breath of fresh air. The shops, he noticed, carried exotic goods, many of which related to the famous mineral springs of the area. He paused before a window marked with gold letters proclaiming "Guatemala Hydrotherapeutics, Ltd." and marveled at the fabulous selection of ornamented enemas tastefully displayed against a holographic waterful above which hovered a delightful rainbow. Hidden speakers bubbled the sounds of the water into his ears; hidden fans blew the green odor of cool water into his face. The muscles of his abdomen relaxed. He sighed and remembered that he really should pick up a memento for the chief, a little something to commemorate this assignment.

"When you travel on assignment," the chief said, during one lecture, "always — repeat *always* — bring back a souvenir to remind you where you've been. Memory, as you know, is elusive, and sometimes objects speak louder than words. I myself," he went

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on, "have set aside a room for my collection of memorabilia." He smiled. "I am in particular proud of certain —"

A voice from the door of the shop said, "Stranger, eh? First time in Ramur?"

Rheemann was startled. He shifted his gaze from the enemas to a bearded face. The shopkeeper, no doubt. "As a matter of fact," said Rheemann, "I was considering your display. Have you something moderately priced?"

The shopkeeper ushered him in and showed him three racks of syringes, bags, and tubes. "These," he said, "are *objets d'art* as well as *objets d'occasion.*"

Rheemann frowned. Languages were not his strong suit, though he knew the chief expected his men to be verbally proficient. "A man who knows only his own language," the chief was fond of saying, "knows no language."

"Art objects and second-hand," the shopkeeper translated. "Which means of great value, since things that have been used and are still usable have an intrinsic wealth by virtue of their survival, don't you agree?"

Rheemann nodded and fingered a small bag made of a green material decorated with silver stars. The syringe was as red as a tongue, the tube silver.

"A very nice choice indeed," said the shopkeeper. "This piece was used by —" he leaned across the counter and whispered into Rheemann's ear "— a little old lady only on Friday nights. And the price is so reasonable. Also it rolls up in a neat package —" he rolled it up and secured it with a green and silver bow shaped like a frog "— and carried anywhere —" he tucked it in his breast pocket.

"Do you wrap for mailing?" asked Rheemann.

"But of course — and postage is included in the total price."

"It is rather nice. I —"

The shopkeeper suddenly stared at him and exclaimed, "By Jove, I've made an error!"

"It's not for sale?"

"No — about you." He came around the counter and gave Rheemann a once-over. "I called you a stranger, but you're not." He slapped his palm to his brow. "I pride myself on my memory. I watch the street and learn the face of everyone that passes. I've seen yours before."

Rheemann squinted at the shopkeeper. Had the fellow been to Bondeen? Perhaps he was a detective too? Hydrotherapeutics might be a cover. Yes, the chief once said that expertise is an excellent disguise since the public is awed by professionalism.

"As sure as my name is Lester Guatemala, I've seen you, but where?"

Should he admit he was a stranger? That would be the same as telling the shopkeeper he was wrong. And he seemed to be the type that did not wish to admit he was capable of error. A little white lie never hurt.

"I know — in the park!"

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Rheemann had frequented parks from time to time. The park in Bondeen was put to good use by the chief for training surveillance. In particular the men's rest room was a favorite hang-out for —

"You have been to the park?" said the shopkeeper.

Here or there, a park was a park, so he would not be lying — exactly. Rheemann nodded.

Now the fellow laughed and trotted back around the counter and wrapped the chief's gift. He said, "Well, I was wrong but only for a few minutes. So that shouldn't count, not really, should it?"

Rheemann agreed and asked the shopkeeper to drop the package in the mail. Then he returned to the street and made his way into the heart of Ramur. For a moment he wondered if the man called Guatemala had thought him a stranger because he wore a knapsack. Then he noticed that while some bikes were fixed with baskets or saddlebags most of the cyclists wore backpacks similar to his so as to leave their hands free for steering. A man with a pack was not uncommon in this city, he concluded. This revelation called to mind a point the chief had made in a recent lecture. "Language is more than words," he announced. "It is ideas and perceptions. It is conceivable that events occur in our culture which cannot — note: *cannot* — occur in another culture because the language of the latter is such that the events cannot be described and, therefore, cannot be perceived."

Someone on the front row requested an example. The chief obliged by relating how explorers brought back to a technological culture a stone-age native. To prove their point, they placed him beside a large cannon — something he had never seen and which he had no words to describe and which, consequently, meant nothing to him. "They fired the cannon!" cried the chief. "And what happened? Nothing. The native did not so much as flinch! And why?"

A joker from the back row, who a week later flunked out, said, "'Cause he was deaf!"

The chief laughed at this — but without smiling — and said, "Deaf? Yes — but culturally deaf!"

A passing cyclist tooted his horn. Rheemann jumped and narrowly missed being run down by a galley-bike whose sides were adorned with advertisements for Ramurian businesses. One caught his eye: The Farcy Budd Academy of Atonal Flatulence. Atonality had always intrigued him. As he entered the central part he wondered why this was so. One's life was more than one realized. As the chief so aptly put it: "It is impossible to go beyond the mobius strip of one's life."

Yes — but he also spoke of antecedents, and while an interest in atonality might suggest a latent desire for disharmony, Rheeman had never been one to rock the boat. He decided such

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ponderings were detrimental to the carrying out of his assignment. So using the over-ride internuncial activated by pinching his right earlobe, he temporarily blocked atonality from his thoughts and considered where he might pass the night.

The park seemed a suitable place. He noticed it was enjoyed by young and old and animals alike. While elderly gentlemen dozed on benches, boys and girls ran up and down the broad paths, laughing and singing. Dogs barked and chased birds. Two little boys were trying their luck in one of the streams that fed the lake. A half-dozen fish flopped out on the grass at their feet.

Rheemann drew a lungful of the fresh air. He sighed. Ah, yes, this was the place to rest — provided he would not call attention to himself. He made a hasty survey and decided to set up camp within a semicircle of boulders and pines bordering a creek. But which habitat would be appropriate? He checked the selection he carried in the pouch on his belt. He had used up number two, "Mound of Leaves," the night before when he camped in the woods beside the trail. Number eleven, "Gray Boulder," looked good, but so did number four, "Hollow Log." He decided on number four, slipped the small capsule from its holder, withdrew the inflatable bucket from the pouch, blew it up, then filled it with water from the creek.

He positioned the bucket in the center of the clearing, and, having checked to see he was not observed, he stepped back and tossed the capsule into the cold, clear water. The capsule floated for a moment, then sank in a swirl. A popping sound followed, and then a log one meter in diameter and three meters long slid out of the bucket onto the ground. It shook, it trembled, as the polymers forming it expanded to their techno-genetically engineered configuration. In thirty seconds the one-molecule layer forming the log was dry and hard. Rheemann walked around it and saw it was hollow at each end for a depth of about fifty centimeters. A hidden door — really a sort of part in the membrane — allowed him to enter and exit. Along the bottom of the log was a second layer of material which formed a cushion for his body. Anyone passing by would never suspect that this log contained a resting man.

Rheemann smiled. The light was fading and soon night would close around the park. His trip had left him sweaty. To cleanse himself he drew another bucket of water from the stream, added a bright red capsule from his belt, and allowed thirty seconds to pass, during which the catalytic agent in the capsule brought the water to a comfortable warmness. Now Rheemann withdrew from the neck of his garment a slender tube. From his right cuff he pulled a second tube which he

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placed in the creek, although this was not absolutely necessary — still, waste not, want not, as the chief was always saying, made him mindful of ecological conservation. Now he pushed the neck tube into the bucket of water. Capillary attraction siphoned the warm water up into the space between his skin and the garment; a combination of gravity and capillary attraction spread the liquid over every square centimeter of his skin. A cleaning agent in the heat capsule emulsified the dirt and grease on his skin, and as the water washed the globules away, a second agent, time-released, formed an aqueous polymer which dried his skin and left it with a delightfully tingling sensation as though he had been massaged.

Rheemann replaced the tubes in his suit, collapsed the bucket and put it in his belt pouch, then entered his hollow log and had supper. His food supply was also stored on his belt. One aspect of police work he enjoyed was dining. He selected a capsule marked "Epicurean's Delight," swallowed it and relaxed with closed eyes. As the pill passed his esophagus, its two outer layers dissolved, releasing chemicals that entered the bloodstream and moments later stimulated his brain. He salivated. The tossed salad with blue cheese dressing was delicious. A roast duck followed, with peas, potatoes, hot bread, fresh butter and blackberry jelly. Dessert was chocolate pudding with whipped cream. The vintage wine was superb.

As the capsule worked its magic, subtle chemicals affected various muscles and caused him to masticate and swallow. Fibrous molecules stimulated his stomach, giving it the pleasant sensation of fullness, then passed into his small and large intestines to agitate their walls and induce a gentle pressure.

Rheemann belched and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then smiled and passed a little gas. An instant later, these actions activated his play-back and the chief's voice filled his ear.

"... in Ramur ... no contact under real identity as officer to be made ... none ... pistol offers lead ... brutality of bandit despicable ... disgusting ... females ... clothing fetishist perhaps ... luck...."

Yes, good luck was always needed, thought Rheemann, laying his head on the pillow built into the floor of the hollow log. It was time for sleep. The temperature was a pleasant 20° Celsius, which the technicians who worked with him had determined was most opportune for his rest, and which was maintained by pores in the skin of the hollow log ringed by heat-sensitive molecules which opened or shut to allow heat exchange.

Ah, tomorrow was another day, Rheeman reflected, one that might, with luck, bring him into contact with this criminal. That he would be able to take the felon into custody he had no doubt. The chief had trained him well. The tricks he knew! He had but to get

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his hands on the hoodlum! And the fact that the robber was armed made no difference. The inner layer of his clothing was antiseptic and contained coagulants as well as detoxifiers, antibiotics, and shock-retarding drugs. True, his head was unprotected, but he had been trained to throw his arms before his face in time of danger; the protective motion was as much a reflex as blinking his eyes.

Rheemann closed his eyes and reached for his left ear. Might as well turn out all the lights, he thought with a big smile. He both deserved and needed the total relaxation a sustained orgasm would bring. And while he slept, the chief's pet project — his deep-sleep training program — would come on. Rheeman did not know what he was learning while he slept. The chief wisely reasoned that his knowing would prejudice the results, which would be ascertained by special tests even now under design.

Hand to ear, eyes closed, Rheemann said a simple, yet inclusive prayer, for as the chief said, "A humble policeman is a decent policeman." Then he twisted. His lights came on, then went out, out out —

An hour, then two, passed. The rapid eye movement signifying the start of his third dream activated his play-back. A soft female voice commenced reciting the night's sleep lesson. The chief had determined that certain qualities of nonmasculine intonation were more tolerable to those being morphean instructed. A smile flickered on Rheeman's lips as his subconscious recognized the voice. His left hand moved towards his ear, then stopped as the information exchange began.

"... identities ... -Euclidean result from denial of ... the fifth or second axioms ... hyperbolic space ... through a point outside a line ... no parallels to that line ... Lobachevsky ... 'Geometrie imaginaire' ... Bolyai ... which is to say ... this space ... parallel lines ... intersect ... with result...."

Rheemann awoke to the sound of the creek and the call of birds. He emerged from his hollow log into a glorious morning light that suffused through the membrane high above and caused the park to glow as though it were under water.

Having made a brief reconnaissance and discovered that his section of the park was deserted, Rheemann put himself through his morning exercise drill designed by the chief to banish sleep and vitalize mind, flesh and spirit for the day's work. Out of habit, he went into a basic tap routine: step, toe tap, chug, brush, step heel tap, hop, toe snap, shuffle stamp, and realized that grass was no substitute for a hardwood floor.

If not tap, then ballet would suffice. Rheeman assumed the first position and, focusing his mind on a point in space, began: temps levé, petit changement de pieds, glissade, petit

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échappé, chassé, grand échappé, pas assemblé, pas jeté, glissade, grand jeté, chassé, jeté fermé, glissade, jeté passé, chassé, grand jeté en tournant entrelacé, glissade, and — to end — pas de chat.

He paused for a moment, still in the first position, and checked his cardiovascular monitors. More exercise was called for; he went through this routine another time, adding a second grand jeté before the pas de chat and a third after it.

Now his pulse and respiration rates were sufficiently elevated, and walking about the clearing to avoid muscle cramps, he breakfasted on six pellets of high energy supplement, several swallows of water from the liter bottle in his pack, and a food capsule. Ah, eggs Benedict — a tidy and delicious way to serve eggs, toast and ham, and the hollandaise sauce was out of this world.

As he chewed and swallowed, Rheemann glanced at the novel he'd taken from his pack along with the water. The pages fell open at 69-70. This Borg Slavitt, whoever he was, was approaching Mt. Rollwell via hang-glider. The air currents were treacherous, and through the clouds he (Slavitt) spotted the wreckage of many another craft like his. But he was not daunted. Nor was the beautiful Renata who rode on the passenger bar behind him, her ample breasts pressed against his —

Bong — bing — bong!

Rheemann recognized the signal for the morning news report. From speakers all over the city the same bell tones were sounding. A female voice said:

"Good morning. Here is the news. Prices of ... meanwhile ... an accident involving two galley-bikes resulted ... police are still investigating ... bank robberies ... eyewitness account —"

Here the announcer's voice was followed by that of a man who related he was employed by the Seymour W. Groppi Bank and Trust and that he had, with his own eyes, witnessed the despicable acts of the robber, who was, incidentally, of medium height and build and was wearing a mint-green outfit with matching hat — he was not masked — Not only did he steal a large sum of cash; he also forced at gunpoint three female tellers to partially disrobe. He made them remove their underwear and stockings and put them in the bag with the cash. "I would know the rascal anywhere!" the witness declared.

Now the announcer said, "... a regrettable ... fifth holdup ... police are ...."

As the subject changed from crime to total liters of mineral water shipped the day before, Rheemann decided it would be best if he changed from his running outfit into clothing more appropriate to the urban environment of Ramur. From his belt pouch he took the inflatable bucket and blew it up. Having filled it with water from the creek, he checked the wardrobe capsules and selected a one-piece suit in-

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dexed "Ramurian Shy-Pink." He dropped the capsule into the water. The surface swirled. A mist rose. Within seconds a pink sleeve flipped over the bucket's rim, followed by a pink leg. It looked as though a drowning man were trying to save himself. A moment later the suit — with matching shoes and hat — was spread out on the grass.

A handsome outfit, thought Rheemann. The pink was soft, not garish; it reminded him of sunlight through a fluffy cloud at dawn. But now he had to remove the clothing he wore. This was easily accomplished by unfolding the cleaning tube from the neck and giving said tube a sharp pull. The disposable suit would tear down the front and then up the back and up and down the sleeves and legs and fall from the body like the molting of a lizard.

Rheemann tugged on the tube. The front of his running suit split partway. He yanked. Nothing happened. He tried again with still greater force. The material refused to tear as it should. He wondered what had gone wrong. Perhaps the chemicals in the wash had been out of date? Perhaps — but that was beside the point. He had to change clothes. As the chief was always saying, "There is more than one way to skin a cat, if one puts his mind to it." Yes. Rheemann tied the tube to the branch of a nearby tree. Now he stepped back as far as the length of the tube would permit and lunged forward, intending that his weight and momentum would tear the material.

But the synthetic fabric was tougher than he had reckoned. His maneuver resulted in his being flipped up and suspended in the air, the tube between his legs, his head downwards. The pressure of the thin tube on his testicular shunts caused him to cry out in pain, and as he tried to bring his legs down, the suit tore just enough to force him still further over. The tube cut into him like a blade. Before he realized it, he was shouting for help.

Through his dangling legs he saw a face. A woman. Peeking upside-down over an upside-down boulder at him. He tried to wave, but the motion caused him to spin around. He said, "I'm having a slight bit of trouble, I fear. Might I impose upon you?"

Warily the woman slipped round the boulder and approached. "It's my suit," Rheeman tried to explain. "You see —"

At that very instant the release-mechanisms functioned. The tube yanked free, sleeves and legs split open, and Rheeman was spread-eagled on the grass, naked as the day he was examined by the police physicians.

The woman screamed. Like a cornered animal, she flattened herself against the boulder and cried, "I don't have money but I'll give you what you really want! Only don't harm me!"

"Actually, I'm —" Rheemann tried to explain.

But she was not listening. In a flash she had stripped off all her clothes, tossed them at his feet, and bounded

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over the boulder, her pale buttocks reminding Rheemann of a deer he had seen during his run to Ramur. And as she fled she screamed for the police.

Rheemann wasted not a moment slipping into his Shy-Pink outfit. He hoped the police of Ramur were not as alert as those of Bondeen. Of course, he reasoned, as he adjusted the wide brim of his hat, the Ramurians did not have the chief — that would make all the difference.

He tossed the woman's garments into the creek, then disposed of his running togs by placing them inside the hollow log, which would chemically degrade as soon as its photosensitive molecules received the requisite amount of sunlight. He slung the knapsack over his shoulder and made his getaway. At the park exit he was stopped by two policewomen who asked if he'd seen anything unusual. Having been taught by his chief that truth was often the best lie, he responded by telling them of a curious fellow who seemed to be living in a hollow log and gave them accurate — if somewhat circuitous — directions for finding the clearing.

"A what?" asked the man behind the counter.

"A Dumbler 2.7," Rheemann said, for the second time.

"What for?"

Rheemann frowned, then turned and looked behind him. No one was there, so what was the clerk up to? "You stock Dumblers, don't you?" he said.

The clerk grinned. "Sure. That's our business, so we got 'em all; only as long as you're paying, why not get a real gun, like the Strafflick-7? It'll blow a hole in the moon!"

"And the Dumbler won't?"

"Are you kidding? The Dumbler's a stunner. It was invented by Hackney Guddee, the leader of the Neo-Hindus, to take care of vermin." He made a gun of his hand, pointed his finger at the door, and said, "Pop goes the mousie! Give him a swell headache, and while he's snoozing you toss him out or drop him in your neighbor's yard. Painless and deathless extermination — that's what the ads claim."

"You mean the Dumbler 2.7 isn't lethal?"

"I didn't go that far." He took a box from underneath the counter, flipped up the hinged cover, and showed Rheeman one of the pistols. It was small enough to be hidden in one's palm.

"The 2.7 is the largest size they make," said the clerk. "In case you don't know, the number refers to amplitude of the wave motion."

Rheeman shook his head.

"What that means in plain words is the bullet creates a shock wave as it exits the barrel, see? The 2.7 has to do with the sine curve of the wave motion, and that, in turn — depending on the type bullet — determines the velocity and effect of the wave when it in-

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terfaces the target. Actually, the Dumbler's pretty good at holding down wave-dispersion. It gives a solid pattern up to — say — a hundred meters. If the waves pass through an aperture smaller than their amplitude, the bending creates a power surge, and that's when the Dumbler can kill. Which type bullet you gonna use?"

The chief had said something about "fleeon." Before he could respond, the clerk said, "You got four choices: neon, argon, xenon, and the synthetic they call freon. The police carry Dumblers; they use freon 'cause it gives max stopping power with its curve."

"All right," said Rheemann, "I'll take a 2.7 and some freon bullets."

"Sure — a box, a case, or what?"

"Why don't you just load the gun for me?"

"Okay, it holds seventeen in the clip and one in the chamber. While I'm doing that, you can be filling out these forms. The government likes to keep track of who owns what gun."

Rheemann was not surprised by this request. Even the chief was a firm believer in gun control. He was always saying, "If we can make it impossible for criminals to buy guns, then they'll have to come out in the open and steal them and we can apprehend them in the act."

Of course, the forms called for such information as name, address, occupation and so forth — facts which Rheemann was not at liberty to divulge to anyone, much less a gun store clerk. Out of his mind he picked at random the name Borg Slavitt and for occupation gave dirigiblist. His address was Central Air Depot, Bondeen — or should it be Ramur? He erased the one and substituted the other.

The clerk placed the loaded Dumbler on the counter and reached for the papers. He would expect to receive an identification card to check the personal information against. Now was the crucial moment.

Rheemann brought the tips of his little fingers together, at the same time saying, "There seems to be something in my left eye. Would you mind taking a look?"

As the clerk leaned toward him, the contact of Rheeman's fingers activated the hypnogenerator built into his eye. His blink reflex was retarded. The pupil dilated to an enormous size in which the clerk saw his own reflection as though he were peering into a cup filled to the brim with black ink. Rheemann's voice was soft and smooth: "You are going under, under; when I say 'good-by,' you will awaken and you will remember nothing of me. You understand?"

The clerk nodded. Rheemann pointed to a bare spot on the counter. "Here is my identification."

The clerk acted as though he were reading it. After a moment he nodded and said, "Yes, the papers check. And you're in the air service. That's why you need the Dumbler, right? Even got mice on airships. Listen, there's a bet-

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ter way to get rid of them. Snakes."

"Snakes?" said Rheemann.

"Boas and pythons. Only problem is keeping 'em hungry, since your common snake can live on one mouse every couple of weeks. I've got the solution, only I can't tell, not yet."

Under the influence of the hypnogenerator he could not help but tell should Rheeman ask. Snakes did not interest him, but he remembered the chief admonished his students never to pass up information regardless of its type. So he said, "What is the solution?"

Showing no resistance whatsoever, the clerk said, "It's simple. I remove two-thirds of their stomachs and intestines, see? Now they're hungry all the time."

Rheemann paid him what he owed, slipped the pistol in his belt case, and started to leave the shop. The clerk said, "You know, I should've figured you for a dirigiblist. You birds know how to dress. Say, another one of you guys was in here not too long ago. Bought a Dumbler, too. He was wearing a blue outfit, or was it green?" His eyes narrowed. "You haven't got a brother, have you?"

At the academy the chief had revealed that statistically most persons had siblings. So while Rheemann was an only child, he did not buck the odds. "I have two brothers and three sisters," he replied.

"That so? I don't have any, but then I'm an orphan, so who knows?"

Rheemann nodded in agreement and went to the door. As he opened it, he glanced back and said, "Good-by."

The clerk blinked. That was the only indication the effect of the hypnogenerator had terminated. As he proceeded along the street, Rheemann was aware of a tear coursing down his left cheek. He brushed it away; it always happened when he used that piece of equipment. Handy gadget, though. Useful for gathering evidence, though such evidence was not admissible in court. But that didn't worry the chief, who had designed it. "So what?" he said. "Since the subject never remembers being hypnotized, how can he prove he was?" Still, he told the students to employ it either to effect their own disguise or to gather hard evidence.

Rheemann called to mind the chief's classic definition of hard and soft evidence. "Take fear," he said. "Suppose a witness maintains she was frightened to the point of death and, consequently, remembers nothing of a crime she obviously saw. Is she perjuring herself to avoid testifying, or is she, in fact, telling the truth? To resolve this problem we must — to coin a phrase — go behind the scenes — and examine the physiological evidence. As you well know, stress registers upon the organism in many ways. Blood pressure elevates, pulse rate increases, field of vision narrows and, in the higher mammals, there is often evacuation of the bladder and intestine. Now

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it is obvious that an untrained person cannot testify as to her blood pressure, pulse rate, or change in vision, and such testimony would, therefore, be considered 'soft' evidence and would probably not be allowed by a wide-awake judge. But everyone is expert enough to assert whether or not she soiled her underwear! This, then, is 'hard' evidence, and don't you forget it! For if you ever do, I'll come down so hard you'll have enough hard stuff of your own to keep a laundry busy for a week!"

Rheemann trembled, then shook himself to regain his cool composure. He adjusted the brim of his hat, giving it a certain rakish sweep upward like that he noticed persons on the street had affected. He saw that he blended into the Ramurian environment. The chief's selection of clothing was, of course, a deciding factor. Dressed as he was, he could've been almost any of the men he passed, for all wore pastel outfits and knapsacks. Protective coloration was what the chief called it. "Camouflage," he explained, "is an interesting term, one worthy of your knowledge. It is derived from words meaning 'to blow smoke in one's face or up one's nose,' the idea being that such action will affect one's perception of reality. In the animal kingdom —"

The ever-alert shifting gaze of the detective, achieved by rigorous conditioning processes and so deep-seated that it functioned continuously regardless what his forebrain might be playing around with, this watchful gaze informed him that directly ahead stood the Seymour W. Groppi Bank and Trust, the same that had been knocked over by the bandit only the day before.

Rheemann slowed his pace and considered his options.

To appear conspicuously inconspicuous, Rheemann clasped his hands behind his back and, whistling though his lips were dry, sauntered past the Groppi Building. Through the big golden "O" of Groppi on the window he saw the bank lobby was laid out pretty much like any other — high tables to accommodate customers who wished to fill out deposit and withdrawal slips, a row of tellers' cages, a low partition towards the rear, behind which were men and women at desks. On the back wall was the vault, its massive door swung open like an invitation to enter. Over the door hung a man's portrait. The face was square, the expression stern. When Rheemann's gaze fell upon that of the portrait, he blinked and looked away.

He stopped underneath the awning of a pet shop. In the window a tarantula crouched behind a hand-printed sign saying: "I'm adorable — take me home!" Rheemann tapped the window and gave the creature a friendly smile, then turned and passed the bank again.

The lobby had not changed.

It was highly unlikely that the criminal would return to the scene of his

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crime. Still, it would not hurt to take a closer look at the bank. Perhaps there were clues that the Ramur police had missed. After all, the chief was stationed in Bondeen, and while his techniques were widely publicized, there were some — even, alas, among the police — who for jealous reasons ignored his great contributions and even went so far as to suggest —

Rheemann swallowed to moisten his throat should he have to speak and extended his hand to open the door, which was controlled by an overhead photoelectric sensor that triggered a servosystem that swung the door inward automatically, with the result that he almost stumbled. As he regained his equilibrium, he saw that the tellers and customers were staring at him. He removed his hat and managed a smile, then realized the male customers had not taken off their hats, so placed his on once more, but in such haste that the wide brim assumed a crazy angle and blocked the vision of his left eye.

The tellers and customers resumed their business. Rheemann wandered towards the vault, looked in, glanced up at the portrait, which was identified by a brass plate as being that of Seymour W. Groppi, and decided that if there were clues they must be hidden in the dust of the rug or in bits of fingerprints under counters.

There were other banks waiting to be violated by the bandit. His place was in them or on the street keeping a lookout. The past was history, the future a dream, and, as the chief was so fond of declaring, "The present isn't much but it's all we ha —"

"Police — that's him!"

A teller was shouting, pointing, as customers ran or fell screaming to the floor.

Rheemann tore the Dumbler 2.7 from his belt case and wheeled about. He was undercover and under orders to remain so, but carefully conditioned reflexes recognized only the authority of stimulus and response.

He brandished his pistol and yelled. "Hold up! Don't panic! I'm a —"

The hat brim obscured his view of one-half of the lobby, but he heard the deadly calm voice command: "Police! Drop it!" and he knew it was the bandit reacting to him. So he turned towards the voice, saw a narrow face and a leveled gun, realized this figure in pastel green had the drop on him and, reflexively, raised his arms to protect his unprotected head as the bandit's finger went white on the trigger and a crackling flash of energy leaped — leaped —

"Borg Slavitt is obviously not his name, since it is the name of the main character of that novel found in his knapsack."

"But he used the name — and apparently had substantiating identification — when he bought the pistol."

"Oh? The clerk doesn't recall him, and the fellow had no I.D. on him.

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True, the serial number of the Dumbler matches that filled out on the form. Still —"

The chief of the Ramurian police force and his crack investigator fell silent for a moment and focused their attention through the one-way mirror at the bandit who had been nabbed two hours earlier as he tried to stick up the Seymour W. Groppi bank for the second time in as many days. Still wearing his Shy Pink clothing, he sat on a stool while a doctor examined him with the bio-mensa equipment the Ramurian Medical College was famous for. The bandit sat quite still, his jaw sagging, his lips parted, his eyes drooping, his shoulders slumped forward so that a roundness showed in his belly. From time to time he spoke, but in an authoritarian tone which did not suit his numbed appearance. His utterances seemed to be statements rather than attempts at communication. A half-dozen had been taped, and now the Ramurian chief activated a play-back, and he and his detective heard them for the third time:

"To catch a robber, it is necessary to think like a robber, to dress like a robber, to act like a robber — in a word, to be so like the robber that one is, essentially, the robber.

"Force is the application of restraint when employed against those who would, by use of force, destroy society and its institutions.

"Video and cinema dull one's perceptions, and too much viewing gives one a deep-seated belief that life has narrative form and that, consequently, reality is governed by cause and effect.

"Those who would be investigators must first investigate themselves, from outside in and from inside out.

"There is no separation between mind and body in the person of a competent detective or a cunning criminal. This is their point of greatest similarity and, therefore, the single facet of their complex characters which may be exploited — either by the detective or by the criminal.

"Sex is to be enjoyed but not as an end in itself. This is where the criminal makes his greatest error, for his twisted mind mistakes firearms for potent masculine symbols and armed robbery as a surrogate for rapine."

The Ramurian chief stopped the play-back. He said, "You've circulated his prints?"

"Yes, sir, finger, palm, and sole. No response. There's no record of his having been printed."

The chief smiled patiently. "You believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe, sir. Standard procedure requires everyone be printed. Perhaps he stole his files — perhaps he's part of a larger operation —"

"That thought occurred to me. And what about the two pistols. If, as the records indicate, he bought a Dumbler 2.7 shortly before today's robbery attempt, what happened to the one he used yesterday?"

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The detective thought about this. He shook his head. The chief said, "Maybe he lost it, eh? Bandits are, after all, human and people do lose things."

The examining doctor stepped into the room and said, "A strange case. Perplexing yet interesting."

"Prognosis?" asked the chief.

"Not good. It seems that when he raised his arms, he enhanced the destructive power of the Dumbler, and, while not lethal, the charge did cause brain damage."

"Can you be more specific?"

The doctor made fists of his hands and pressed them together. "The brain is bilaterally symmetrical somewhat like this. The left portion controls the actions of the right side of the body and vice versa — with some exceptions. One of these has to do with verbalization. It seems that the left hemisphere controls that. We know from experimenting with psychotics that the same areas of the right hemisphere, when stimulated by a weak electric shock, cause aural hallucinations. The subjects hear 'voices' which oftentimes command them to action and which are usually believed by the subjects to be some god speaking directly to them and to them alone. Finally, we suspect that in psychotics some sort of variation in body chemistry — perhaps triggered by extreme stress — causes the electrical discharge that stimulates the response.

"This appears to be what has happened to our bandit. With your permission I'll have him taken to the institute for further observation. To be honest, I have little hope that he will ever act differently from as you see him now."

The chief glanced through the window at the forlorn figure. The chair he slumped upon seemed suddenly too big for him, as though he were a child trying to occupy his father's place and in danger of slipping off onto the floor at any moment.

The chief gave his assent in writing. After the doctor went back to his patient, the detective clapped his hands together and, grinning, said, "Well, that closes the case!"

Perhaps the chief saw in the clean-cut features and bright eyes of the young detective something of himself when he was at the start of his career. At any rate, he was not smiling as he said, "We shall see."

The chief entered the max-security lecture hall located underneath the elephant-training ring. The students came to their feet as one person and said, "Good morning, sir!"

"Yes, indeed, a good, good morning!" beamed the chief. He gave them the gesture indicating they might sit and went directly to his subject.

"From reliable sources in Ramur I have learned some interesting facts. First, one of our special operatives has disappeared and must be presumed to

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have been killed in action. More of this later. Second, the bandit who had been brutalizing property and persons — mainly female — in that distant city has been apprehended. Furthermore —" he paused and stared at face after face to impress upon the group the importance of his words "— furthermore, the bandit bears an amazing resemblance to our agent, even down to such details as finger, sole, and hand prints. But we are not surprised, are we?"

A universal frown dimmed the bright faces of the attentive students.

The chief went on: "We are not surprised because we know there is no length to which criminals will go to accomplish their nefarious plans!"

The chief raised his voice. "Third, my informant tells me that the day after — *the very next day* — the bank in which he was captured was held up by another bandit who eyewitnesses swear looked exactly like the first!"

He swung his arms loosely, then hugged them across his chest and said, "I tell you this is proof positive that we are faced with a diabolical criminal. But fear not — soon another of our agents will be en route to continue the good fight. And now, lest we forget the one who served so well —"

He snapped his fingers. The entry slid open to admit a female baboon. Carrying a wooden stool, she sauntered over to the chief, slammed down the stool and perched upon it, her doglike face between her upraised knees.

"This fine specimen of *Papio anubis*," declared the chief, "carries within her organs of reproduction a cloned cell of our departed Rheemann, which is to say that Rheemann still exists, that — in fact — he has never ceased existing! Our people have succeeded in accelerating the mitotic process without losing integrity of replication so that in weeks rather than months a new Rheemann will be born.

"This is our secret weapon! This is the means by which we shall focus upon crime and destroy it to the last criminal! Visualize a space in which parallel lines remain parallel yet converge and meet at a finite point, and there you have it — see?"

The students shifted in their seats and stole furtive glances at one another, seeing perhaps for the first time for what they really were certain similarities which previously were explained by the gray uniforms all wore. Now it seemed as though a single person were sitting in the center of an intricate maze constructed of mirrors. Only the baboon, who now pursued a flea into the shaggy mystery of her crotch, only she was decidedly different.

The chief snapped his fingers twice. The baboon leaped to the floor, picked up her stool, and ambled out the door.

"And now," said the chief, smiling confidently, "let us proceed with the lesson for today. The Ganser Syndrome. Two times two is what?"

"Almost five," the class responded.

"Exactly!" beamed the chief, going on to more subtle examples.

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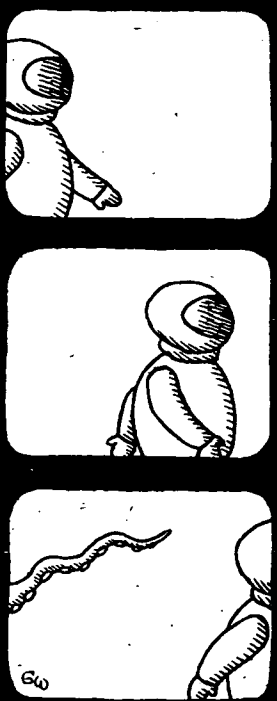
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



SHINE ON...AND ON...AND ON...

Stanley Kubrick has made an incredibly varied assortment of films, and each one is in a way an extraordinary example of its type: the heist film *(The Killing)*, the historical epic *(Spartacus)*, the meaningful war drama *(Paths of Glory)*, the historical picaresque *(Barry Lyndon)*, and science fiction in various modes such as philosophical high tech *(2001)*, cautionary allegorical *(A Clockwork Orange)* and sophomore holocaust *(Dr. Strangelove)*.

Those of us concerned with the various subgenres of fantastic film hoped that he would give us a horror film, one that would be equally memorable. Well, he has and it isn't; and you can't know how much I regret having to say that.

The major problem with *The Shining* is a very simple one; it just doesn't make sense. In every area of the fantastic — science fiction, supernatural, whatever — there has to be an absolute adherence to internal logic to shore up the intrinsic unbelievability of the material. Otherwise, you end up with surrealism — which is all very well if you *want* surrealism. I don't happen to.

This lack of logic is strongly linked to another matter directly concerned with the "horror film" as a form. There are really two different kinds of horror films. One has to do with the breakdown of natural laws, which allows

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such things as vampires, wolfmen, and ghosts to menace humanity. The fear inspired comes not only from the threat imposed by these creatures, but that nature has been subverted and the *super*natural is real. This is, of course, a subgenre of fantasy.

The other has to do with the breakdown of human sanity. Here the threat is imposed by human madness, and is not essentially fantastic or supernatural at all. In this sort of horror film, for the last 20 years or so the major effect has been achieved by the shock of gratuitously overdone violence. In *Psycho*, Hitchcock showed us how a master can handle this. Unfortunately, he opened the floodgates to a lot of nonmasters who seem to be vying with each other to see who can be the most explicitly unpleasant.

Be that as it may, it is unwise to try to combine the two sorts of horror film since they thematically undermine each other. And this is what Kubrick has done in *The Shining* (or what Stephen King has done in the book, but for the purposes of this column, let's just call it Kubrick's film).

As everyone probably knows, it concerns a family of three who are caretaking a huge resort hotel in Colorado during the winter, roads and telephone knocked out by snow. Daddy is obviously soon on the way to looney tunes country and starts seeing generally unpleasant manifestations that obliquely urge him to violence. Are they ghosts, or just delusions? Well, small boy child shares a few of the visions and has some of his own; we have been shown that *he* is psychically gifted, but that particular touch of fantasy seems planted as a red herring, since it results in nothing.

Wife/mother also sees a couple of visions, but here also they seem gratuitous; she and the child have enough to worry about, with Father Fruitcake running around the place with an axe and intent to dismember. A few ghosts here and there are the least of their problems. On the other hand, the audience is to a degree distracted from their plight by the anticipation that the "ghosts" will do something.

Besides this fundamental contradiction in the script, there are other matters that are either unexplained or irrelevant; it's hard to decide which. In particular, there is the final shot, obviously significant, of a photograph dated 1921, with the father prominently in the foreground. (The film is very definitely set in the present.) Sorry, Mr. Kubrick, I didn't get it.

There were some other matters I wasn't all that happy about. The director and his star at times seemed unsure as to whether they weren't doing a spoof of the horror film. Jack Nicholson has a pettily diabolical face, anyhow — he looks like the kind of person that *would* enjoy pulling the wings off flies — and generally unshaven, rolling his eyes, slavering and

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Kit Reed is a long-time contributor to F&SF, most recently with "Shan," January 1978 and "The Holdouts," June 1977. Her latest novel is MAGIC TIME, and her new story below concerns an astonishing partnership.

The Visible Partner

BY

KIT REED

I do not like it here. It's damp and smelly and the chill is creeping up through my ankles and haunches and heading for my brain. If I don't get out I am going to catch my death in another minute but I am stuck here, crouching in the dark while that fool runs around naked which means I couldn't see him even if it was light enough. I don't even know where he is running around, who he is with. He could be a hundred miles from here, at my elbow, in my erstwhile office, going through my most private things.

An invisible man needs a visible partner, he said when he made the pitch. It sounded reasonable enough. Who knew I was going to be left holding the bag in a dozen different places, or that I would lose my job, my reputation, my girl, my last chance for a reasonable life? Who could foretell that the formula would make him crazier and crazier? I should have been more careful, I should have guessed he would be difficult to live with and impossible to get rid of, but he sold me such a bill of goods and besides, he said I would get to take turns.

That's exactly what he said. "And besides, we're going to take turns being invisible, you'll get to see what it's really like."

"What's it like, Ivor?"

There were ripples in the air where I think he was standing. There were sounds of him waving his arms and sighing all at the same time, he was communicating something mysterious and wonderful. "I can't explain, Sam, you'll have to feel it for yourself."

"In a pig's valise," I said. "I haven't even agreed to do it."

"OK, I'll take my business elsewhere."

"Wait a minute, friend, that's our

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formula you were fooling around with, it's just as much mine as yours."

"Our formula plus Ingredient X." He pulled something out and set it on the table. It was a tiny flask. "My invention." I made a grab for it but it had already disappeared: in his clenched fist? In a pocket? In his armpit? "You could spend the rest of your life looking for Ingredient X."

"All right, bastard, who needs it?"

"Think of the power." His voice was coming from a different corner of the room and no matter how fast I turned I couldn't follow. "You haven't lived until you've felt the warm air all over you, or run naked in a crowd."

"Naked? You're naked?"

"Stupid. Even socks would show up. I can be naked anywhere." He paused heavily. "Theatrical dressing rooms, girls' locker rooms, anyplace."

"Aren't you cold?"

"Idiot." He kicked over a chair. "Banal pedestrian idiot. I never should have wasted my time with you. I never should have...."

I could hear his voice retreating. "Wait a minute." Images were crowding in. I imagined myself invisible in a dozen different places, soft breezes on my bare ass. "Ivor, wait."

He sounded intolerably smug. "I knew you'd come around. Now get me something to put on."

"What's in it for me?"

"Fifty percent of the profits. Besides, I told you, you'll get your turn."

I got my hooded bathrobe and the slipper socks and a ski mask, he put them on and the only disconcerting parts were the gap at the throat and the great empty spaces visible through the eyeholes and the mouth. At least it made him a little easier to deal with, I knew where to look when we were talking and he couldn't sneak up on me.

I said, "OK, Ivor, what's the plan?"

"I thought we could push through your promotion."

All right, I jumped. "What do you know about that?"

"I've been hanging around the department tenure meetings," he said. "You're in big trouble, friend."

"How could you—" I could see scraps of nothing between my gloves and the bathrobe sleeves. "Oh, right."

In spite of the fact that I am a somewhat unorthodox chemist, and I have been known to spend valuable classroom time getting my students to work on commercial formulae, like cleaning fluids and aphrodisiacs, my case had been forwarded to the department, and now it was up or out. This was a sore point with Ivor, who was let go two days before he'd disappeared. The chairman had him in to break the news, he screamed, "You'll be sorry," and stormed out and simply disappeared. Nobody had seen or heard from him. Until he turned up in my library, that is. Hell yes I was surprised.

"What do you care whether I get tenure? I mean especially since you didn't."

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"Let's say I have a vested interest. I need your lab. I can't refine my formula without proper equipment."

"Our formula," I reminded him.

"Tell that to the tenure committee and see how far it gets you. Do you want me to help you or not?"

"I don't know, I...."

"Your case looks pretty bad."

"All right, all right, what do you think you can do for me?"

"Well to begin with, I can replace a couple of letters in your dossier. To be frank, they couldn't be worse."

"And if I don't cooperate?"

"Slkkkk." He ran a gloved finger across his invisible throat.

"And I'll really get a chance to use the formula?" I tried to imagine warm winds on my bare skin.

"You bet you will."

"OK, when do we start?"

"Not so fast. Before we get into the tenure thing, there are a couple of things that need attending to."

Which is how I ended up holding the bag outside Leda Kalita's apartment while he threw down his shaving things, her love letters, some jewelry he thought might be worth money, and how it happened to be me that went to the pawn shop to see what I could get for the stuff; you can't hock things when you're invisible.

When I came back Ivor said, "Well, obviously that isn't enough money."

"You said you were going to get those letters out of my dossier."

"You bet. But first we have to do a couple more things."

So at the bank it was me that created the diversion by trying to take out all the academic vice-president's personal savings, while Ivor slipped behind the counter as neatly as you please and began schlepping bags of money toward the door. Why nobody saw them floating I do not know, because by that time I was engaged in a fullscale tantrum on the floor of the bank so that guards came, tellers came, a doctor came, by that time I was pretty sure Ivor had gotten away with the money and so just as they were about to sock me full of Thorazine I sat up and told them it was a scene I was working up for acting class. Hell yes it was embarrassing, but it worked, and Ivor promised to remove the bank's letter from my dossier just as soon as I helped him do a couple more things.

With the money he bought out the laboratory of crazed old Dr. Knox, who was fired from our college years ago because he believed it was possible to program plants to differentiate between people and, having done so, to teach them to kill. Don't ask me what Ivor wanted with the stuff, all I can tell you is that he moved it all into the basement of my split level and after he'd set it up he wouldn't let me come in. I could hear him rattling around down there until all hours.

I left him to it because by that time I was consoling Leda Kalita, who had called me just as she found the things missing, all Ivor's belongings plus her

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favorite ruby ring. She wanted to cry on my shoulder, under the circumstances there was nothing I could tell her that would help and so I just held her and patted her on the back, I'll admit, it felt really good.

She said, "I don't know what to think. One minute he was with me and the next, ffft, without a trace."

"That's terrible." I held her but I kept one eye open. "And the jewelry."

"I don't know what happened to him, whether he's all right or whether he's lying dead somewhere.... Oh Sam, he was getting very strange there toward the end."

"I bet he was."

"And not getting tenure seemed to push him off. He was furious, he was making all kinds of threats, and then...." She was too broken up to go on.

"Ffft," I said, to help her out.

"That's it. Ffft."

"Forget him, honey, he wasn't worth it anyway."

The next thing I knew Ivor had bought out a florist's shop, or maybe it was a greenhouse. There were bushes in the stairwell, begonias in the living room and bromeliads in the kitchen, and I didn't like the way they were looking at me. I tried to ask him about it but he was getting testier and testier, and when I accused him of being short with me he said if I didn't like it I could forget about getting tenure, worse yet, I would never work again.

I let Leda comfort me. I couldn't tell her my troubles so I would let her tell me hers, how Ivor was insanely preoccupied during his last days, how right before he left he promised to come back for her.

I said, "I wouldn't count on that."

Her eyelashes were spiky with tears. "You wouldn't?"

"A lot of men are rats." I put my arms around her.

I thought I heard a snicker. *Bastard*, I thought, *at a time like this*, but there was nothing I could do or say to get him out of the room.

So I think Ivor was sitting on the desk in her crowded office while Leda and I played our first love scene: the hugging and mutual confession, yes I felt lonely in a crowd, I too often wondered where it was all leading, I was afraid of not getting tenure but she should not be, we scientists all know the arts are easy sledding; I think Ivor was there throughout our mutual discovery, the murmuring and increasing warmth....

"Oh Sam," she said, "something just brushed my hair."

"Imagination." I thought I heard a door slam. "Now, about you and me...."

So it was me and Leda after that, Leda and me. That night at dinner when Ivor came down in my best bathrobe, I said, "Ivor, why did you have to treat poor Leda that way?" He was wrapped tightly in the bathrobe but he had gotten careless about the ski mask, so I looked him right in what I thought might be the eye.

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"Never mind," he said, a little huffily, I thought. "Part of the master plan."

"About this master plan. You never told me there was going to be a master plan. You just said you wanted me to do a couple of little things and you would do a few little things for me."

"By the way," he said as if I hadn't even spoken. "I got rid of those unfavorable letters today, you know, the ones in your promotion folder? And I put in some substitutes I wrote myself, pretty good forgeries if I do say so. I made you out to be the next Nobel candidate."

"I'm very grateful, Ivor. Then our relationship is more or less at an end?" I could hardly wait to get rid of him and his plant collection. I couldn't stand the way he sat around totally expressionless, it gave me the creeps, the way he kept sneaking up on me.

He put down his fork. "Well, if you want it that way. Of course you haven't had your turn at the formula, you know, naked power?"

I was thinking about Leda. "That doesn't seem so important now."

"That's all very well," he said, "but of course there is the matter of Dean Plotkin's opposition to your case."

"What— about— Dean— Plotkin's— opposition?"

"Well, frankly, those letters I put in your file almost did the trick, you were almost home free, but you might as well know I was almost home free too, I was just about to get tenure when, well, it's this last little thing that's the pitfall. Dean Plotkin can ruin everything."

"What are you talking about?"

"Plotkin. He's old, but he's powerful, he can turn the whole department against you in a flash."

"All right, Ivor, what do you want me to do?"

Which is how I ended up distracting the guards at the Lifman Institute while potted rubber plants floated by behind them, and how I ended up in the bushes outside Dean Plotkin's dining room window letting Ivor stand on my shoulders so he could put a geranium inside.

"But I don't see what this is going to do?"

"Just wait," Ivor said. "My plants will do it for us."

"Do what?"

He only said, "You'll see."

All right, I didn't know how deep I was in. I didn't know what the plants were going to do, and by the time I found out things were happening so fast that there was no way for me to extricate myself. Unwittingly, I had helped Ivor inaugurate his master plan. The first thing was, when I got to the office the next morning everybody was talking about Dean Plotkin. He was out sick, mystery disease, terrible symptoms, nobody knew what was the prognosis. I was pondering that when I picked up the afternoon papers and read about the mystery epidemic sweeping the Lifman Institute.

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"Ivor, what does this mean?"

"You wanted Plotkin out of the way, didn't you?"

I shook the paper at him. "But *this*."

"It was Lifman's letter that kept me from getting tenure. He knew about my invisibility research, he thought he could get rid of me and then...." He read the paper, laughing. "Don't you see? Revenge."

"But Ivor, everybody in the whole building is sick."

"That'll teach Lifman to fool around with me."

"But what if they die?"

"Shut up and let me enjoy this," Ivor said.

I was frightened, riddled with guilt, wondering what to do about Ivor and how you could turn in somebody who was invisible, but each day something happened to keep me from acting. The department met on me without Dean Plotkin and voted to forward my promotion to the advisory committee. If the committee liked me, I was as good as promoted, and I couldn't do anything to jeopardize that. Furthermore, Leda seemed to like me better and better, she invited me over at odd hours, and made all kinds of promises. So I was torn, I was happy about the promotion, about Leda, but at the same time there were shadows: all those people sick, Ivor clanking in the cellar, the demands he made on me.

When he robbed a place to fund his projects, it was me holding the bag outside while he floated the money through the window. Some of the work embarrassed me, I especially hated creating diversions in department stores, or at the bank, but by that time I had gone too far to turn back.

Ivor was working on the Advisory Committee for me, reporting all their secret deliberations, and I was so close to my goals that I couldn't afford to let him stop. At the same time his activity in our cellar was getting more and more frenetic; bigger and more dangerous plants moved in every day and Ivor sent me out for more expensive and more suspicious ingredients to use in his deadly formula. I couldn't stop him and I couldn't get him to tell me what he was doing. I couldn't even refuse to help him or he would go to the promotion committee and put terrible letters about me in their files.

Around that time Leda became strangely distracted. She was always glad to see me when she was home, but she was hardly ever home. By that time we were sort of semi-engaged, but when I tried to find out where she went at night she would only shut me off. Ivor had made me help him move plants into the house of an old enemy, and the whole family was sick. What's more we knocked over a jewelry store and he tripped the alarm so we almost got caught. That night in bed I couldn't sleep for trembling. The more I thought about it the worse I felt because it was obvious who would be arrested if we did get caught. Ivor would

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drift away in the night and it was me they would drag off to prison, me, the visible partner. It was my house that was filled with the incriminating evidence, it was me that would go to jail while Ivor drifted back to eat my food and use all the conveniences until he had exhausted my resources; then he would just drift off and find some other sucker to play. The more I thought about it the worse I felt. I wasn't any closer to being promoted than I had been when we first made our agreement. My life was no better because of my association with Ivor; if anything, it was worse.

"Things aren't any better, Ivor."

"These things are slow." I think he was sitting on the corner of my coffee table.

"Ivor, it's been three months."

"Shut up or I'll sic the plants on you."

"That's another thing."

"I'm warning you."

"Don't try it." I raised my secret weapon: a can of spray paint. I spritzed the corner of the coffee table, to show him I meant business. "This stuff is indelible."

"All right, all right," Ivor said. "How would you like your turn with the formula?"

"I don't know, Ivor." I kept the can at the ready. "What's in it for me?"

"Would I con you? You can go to the ballet, mess around in the girls' dressing room."

"It's too late for that."

"All right," Ivor said. "They're meeting on your case for the last time today. Frankly, you're still in trouble. You can be there at the finish, rearrange their minds. A whisper here, a diversion created there. You know it's a paper vote, and at the last minute you can just switch papers."

"And they won't know?"

"Sam, you'll be invisible."

I was mulling it. I had more than one reason to want that. I thought Leda might be cheating on me. I put down the spray can. "All right. No tricks?"

"Would I con you?"

He made quite a ceremony of it, bringing me a little vial of the formula and making me stand in front of a mirror while I drank it so we could both watch. I said, "How do I know this isn't poison?"

"Don't be a schmuck."

First I thought the top of my head was coming off. I dropped the vial and staggered around trying to keep my skull from exploding. When that was over I felt a sensation of enormous lightness, coupled with vertigo, and when I could see again I was terrified because the only things showing in the mirror were a shirt and tie. "Ivor."

"You see?"

I stripped off the clothes, realizing as I did so that there was no reason to be embarrassed because I couldn't see Ivor and he couldn't see me. I was alone and free. "Ivor. It's wonderful."

He was capering and crowing.

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"What did I tell you? Sam? Sam?"

Son of a bitch, he couldn't find me. I laughed like a lark and took off.

It was wonderful. I stole food for lunch and ate standing up stark naked in the faculty dining room. I crashed a couple of board meetings and when it was time I went to the room where the Advisory Committee meets. When the secretary went in to put folders at each place along with the pencils and clean scratch pads, I just followed her in.

Ivor. That bastard lied. The first thing I noted was that all the rotten letters were still in my dossier, plus one or two. Ivor had not done a damn thing for me. I thought I would take them and escape while I still could but by that time the committee was filing in. That was the second thing. Dean Plotkin was alive and well, and he was going to testify. It hadn't been Ivor's plant that put him in the hospital, it was appendix, and now he was just fine. Another thing: he wanted to speak in my favor, so that was the third lie. By that time I was thinking: Ivor, you bastard, what are you trying to do to me?

The provost was saying, "...the matter of these letters, they look very bad to me."

There was Dean Plotkin, that I had tried to remove: "But he's a brilliant teacher, and I think you need to make allowances."

"That's all very well," the provost said, "but there is the matter of this extra document. It just came today."

My colleagues all looked astounded. "What document?"

By that time I was hanging over the provost's shoulder, unbeknownst to everyone, and there it was, all done up in triplicate, I was able to get close enough to recognize the tracks of my own typewriter and Ivor's handwriting in the margins, I only caught a couple of the phrases but I knew I was in trouble so I did a stupid thing. I made a grab for it.

"What the...."

The provost was too quick for me and so I had to push over his chair and climb on his chest before he could recover and try to take the thing away from him. We were grappling when I became aware of voices rising behind us: the committee and my respected senior colleagues, all staggered, astounded, in full cry.

"Great Scott."

"Why this is...."

"What is it?"

"It's a, it looks like...."

"It's taking shape. It's the candidate."

"He's naked!"

"Disgraceful."

"Disgusting."

"Get off the provost, you bandit."

"Idiot, what are you doing without any clothes?"

I fell back then and got off the provost to find them all staring at me with expressions ranging from shock to revulsion. Poor old Dean Plotkin was shaking his head and saying:

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"Oh Sam, I had such high hopes for you."

"What can I say?"

"You realize this is the end of your career."

I was backing away fast. "I guess it wore off. I certainly never intended...."

"I think you'd better get out, you may stay out your contract at this institution but I will ask you never to appear on this campus again. Your checks will be mailed to your home." Our president made a lunge for me. "You.... You."

Dean Plotkin stepped between us. "Oh Sam, what possessed you?"

"You want to know what possessed me?" I made a grab for the president's topcoat and used it to cover my nakedness. "I'll tell you what possessed me." I was getting madder. "Somebody sold me a bill of goods."

By that time I knew exactly what I was going to do. I pulled the president's topcoat around me and headed for Leda's office. She would get me some clothes and once I had them, I was going to effect my revenge.

When I got there her door was partly open. There was somebody with her; I recognized the voice.

"But Ivor, he never hurt you."

"They were going to give him tenure instead of me. It was his fault, all of it."

"But this kind of revenge. Haven't you gone too far?"

He ignored her. "Naturally I want to thank you for keeping him occupied. And now, on to phase two."

I peeked around the door. You can imagine how eerie it looked. The bitch was sitting on his lap. "Phase two?"

"The destruction of the university," he said, "and then—"

"And then?"

"With my plants I can terrorize the world."

"Not those little house plants...." She meant the ones in my basement. When had she been in my basement? Had she been there with him? I was rigid with rage.

"No. The big ones, at the Ajax warehouse. I'm going to insinuate them into high places, and then...."

"The Ajax warehouse?"

"Nobody knows about that but you and me. Leda, together we can do anything."

"Oh darling," Leda said. Her half of the embrace grew more intense.

I left them there.

I will not attempt to describe my emotions. I will only tell you what I did. First I went home and dressed, in black so I would be hard to see. Then I got a can of gasoline and set fire to the house. There is, after all, nothing left for me here. When Ivor goes back he will find a gaping pit because the fire exploded a gas main and everything went, house, formula, poison plants and all. If he needs the formula to stay invisible, then he will be up the creek. If he needs the formula to regain visibility, then he is in trouble too. With

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no place to go he will come to the Ajax warehouse, that he thought was his secret alone, and when he does he will discover that I have cut off the electricity. In the dark we will be equal, Ivor and me. He will come directly to the fuse box and because it is so dark he will not see me crouching with my spraygun, he will know nothing of my presence until I let him have it with the luminous paint.

I will let him have it with the paint and then I will be shut of him. I will send him streaking through the night like a Roman candle, knocking over plants, roaring into the streets. Maybe the paint will kill him but I hope it doesn't kill him right away. Maybe it will only burn him badly, maybe if the invisible outer layer burns off he will run away from me like the Visible Man the children put together out of plastic parts, with fatty layers, muscle, ganglia all raw and visible, everything showing but the skin.

(from page 94)

licking his chops, he reminded me of the dear old Wolfman, or John Barrymore doing a silent Jekyll and Hyde without benefit of makeup. And after going around the bend (more than one, in fact, since the climactic chase takes place in a hedge maze), he gimps along on an injured leg with the gait of our badly wrapped friend, the Mummy.

And for the first time, I objected to Kubrick's use of classical music for background. Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*, with its eerie tremolos and variably pitched tympani, is almost too obviously atmospheric; contrariwise, there is none of the sense of careful choreography to the music that was so breathtaking in *2001;* the piece is used in bits and pieces, and where it didn't fit, some more was composed to match.

And it's just too damn long. I have always held — and repeated to the point of tedium— that brevity is the soul of the horror film. Since *The Shining* was announced, I have tempered that maxim with "unless Kubrick shows us differently." He hasn't; 2¼ + hours of Jack Nicholson going to pieces among assorted nasty ghosts just doesn't hold up.

Can I say anything good about it? Well, it's produced and filmed splendidly, with the gloss and professionalism you seldom see now. Shelley Duvall and Danny Lloyd, as mother and child, are marvelously convincing potential victims. And as one well-known critic pointed out, it was certainly brave of Kubrick to give us a horror film that takes place almost entirely in the daytime. Unfortunately, he didn't succeed in capturing that particular eeriness of light and silence that comes with a heavy snow.

In all, *The Shining* is of very low wattage despite the brilliance of its director.

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R. M. Lamming wrote "The Ink Imp," May 1980. She returns with a compelling and ironic tale about a bureaucrat of the future and the sacrifices we make for the sake of security.

An Unfortunate Incident In the Life of A License Examiner

BY

R. M. LAMMING

Clenty's wife wasn't much to look at, not the first time you looked. Her hair was the color of a piece of wood that's been split open and left to dry in the sun, (that's a memory from my childhood: you didn't need a permit to handle wood in those days). Then her eyes: well, they seemed locked away inside themselves, just peeping out. Lots of Timers have eyes like that. I suppose it's their one way of keeping private. When you and your partner share an apartment with another couple, and the four of you know that at the end of your twelve-hour Home-time, two more couples take it over, "home" is not a sense of place, it's a security fixed inside your mate or, more particularly, inside yourself. And that is where the locked-up look comes in.

She'd come straight from work, her face still wearing that neat and tidy expression you see on all the office girls in the Public Services. Only this face looked somehow more fixed, permanent. Maybe she had other faces for when she was with Clenty, cooking his

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meals, or lying in bed with him, but I couldn't imagine it. I could hardly imagine her with Clenty at all. I admit, I was surprised. Her black outfit rose high and tight at the throat and was gathered into a maroon belt at the waist so that it showed off her shape well enough, but it managed to give her a clinical, sexless air, or maybe that was just part of herself. Certainly I'd imagined a man like Clenty would have something more—obvious — waiting for him at nights. But there she was, and there's no accounting for tastes. She stood in front of my desk with those discreet eyes and an air of cunning patience, while I glanced through the notes.

"Sit," I told her.

They prefer to stand. It gives them the idea—mistaken, I might add—that they're impressing us with their respectful attitude and their physical attributes at one and the same time. But she obeyed me at once, taking the nearest chair and sitting on it with her legs slanted to one side, pressed tightly together.

—Well—I announced to myself — here goes—

I was tired after a hard shift and still irritated to have found this case assigned to me. It had been done to test my integrity, I supposed. The boys upstairs play these tricks occasionally. Well, they would soon see how straight I was! I was determined to be ruthlessly orthodox and impartial. Setting the time-check on my watch, I shuffled the papers again; then I began to study the girl as if I'd just read something that made a profound impression on me — the old charade for the forty-fifth time that day. This initial scrutiny is intended to soften up the applicant and remind her that the Examining Officer's decision is final. There is no court of appeal.

"So," I smiled impersonally, "you and Clenty wish for a Full Share in your apartment?"

Her chin jerked up. It always takes them aback when we start there, with the comparatively minor point. But Clenty's wife was on guard, and she didn't gabble or deny it.

"Yes, sir."

Her voice was soft, almost lifeless: it could have affected me in much the same way as a limp handshake, but I've learned to discount such things or, at least, not to be distracted by them. I ran through the routine observations.

"You're asking us to take one of the other couples and relocate them, just so that *you* can have twenty-four-hour access? I suppose you're aware that may involve considerable hardship for them? We might have to move them further out from their places of work, we might even have to separate them, place them in different hostels. You realize that?"

She didn't answer, but her eyes grew tiny.

"Do you think Clenty and yourself contribute enough to society to justify so much trouble?"

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Now it was her turn to smile, nervously, but with a touch of triumph, as she said, "With respect, sir, *Clenty's* is a job of real importance — and then, you see," she added hastily, as if maybe she'd been too bold, "it's not as though we want that Full Share for ourselves. It's so we can have a child...."

"Ah, yes, the Child License. That's another privilege you're after."

I frowned down at the sheaves of medical notes, work attendance and reliability reports, results of the IQ tests. They were all excellent.

"Well, you certainly have all the preliminary qualifications..." this time my own smile was warmer, the official stamp of approval, "...strong, dependable in your work, bright with it."

"Thank you, sir."

And she relaxed a fraction, which is, of course, where she went wrong. I'm a seasoned judge of these things. Without moving an inch, she relaxed; it was in her voice, the contours of her mouth, every part of her body, a diminutive withdrawal of fight.

—How these women long to believe that *we* are on *their* side! Just a little praise, and they compulsively abandon their defenses, and yet they know we'd lose our jobs if we passed more than 12 percent of them! When I saw her respond to my compliments, I began to feel worried about Clenty's wife. I felt she was heading for a slip.

To give her an opportunity to tighten up, I asked, "The License fee? I take it you've got that all saved and ready?"

"Yes."

That was safe enough: just the one meager monosyllable. Despite its eloquence it could hardly sink her case. Clearly like most of the women I saw, she had so much to say about the sweat and worry of scraping the money together that she couldn't trust herself to speak of it at all. I helped her out in the usual manner.

"Leisure-time work, and so on?"

"That's right, sir."

Then she shut up, tight as a clam. I fondly began to hope my alarm had been premature, and laying down the notes, I sank back in my chair, very conscious of the recorder whirring softly in its niche beneath my desk. That only happens when I actually care which way the case will swing — which isn't often. To give her a break, I gazed out across the crown of her bleached head at the seething lights of the City. Soon it would be Turnover Time, that edifying moment when the Commercial world blinks, an instant's darkness before the Second Circuit takes over and all the advertising stands blaze with new slogans.

"Mrs. Clenty," I said, "have you ever stopped to wonder just how many applicants pass through the License offices of this City in a single day?"

The question troubled her; she rubbed her legs together uneasily.

"Thousands...."

"That's right. So you appreciate, you and your husband are just one

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couple in a whole crowd clamoring for this privilege of child-raising?"

I gave her the cold-eye treatment, a fish's stare, and it brought the very slightest suggestion of color to her cheeks.

"We know that, sir, but...."

She looked down at her hands, which she had folded on her lap like pieces of paper, and to my chagrin I saw she couldn't complete the sentence. Because she faded out like that, I had no choice to press the point.

"But? What makes you so special?"

I waited. Still she said nothing. On the record this would create a poor impression. I had to prod her hard.

"Why should we say 'yes' to you, when we have to say 'no' to so many? Perhaps you're not aware that almost all the applications that come to us — their files are just as impeccable as your's."

It wasn't quite the truth, but the statement did its job. To my relief, she rallied; her head came up, and I thought she gave a start, as if she'd just recognized her cue.

"Clenty and me," she said, "we feel we're the right sort to have a family. I suppose they all say that, but, well — we've got faith."

"Faith?"

This was throwing away her chances. I frowned, and her eyes suddenly broke through their shutters wide with alarm.

"Oh..." she floundered, "I mean, in the future, sir! We think everything's going to work out...."

So that was it! The old, hoary line of faith in the Government! Well provided she didn't waver, it would do as well as any. Some old hand at the License Game must have wised her up on it. They'd probably told her it was the simplest and safest way to approach the goal — and so it is, if you know how to avoid the pitfalls. I hoped she knew. I began to nod very wisely.

"By faith in the future," I told her, "what you mean is that you understand the necessity for restrictions. You perceive their merit. You realize that sacrifices in our own generation will guarantee a tolerable world for our children. Am I right?"

"Yes," she said, nodding fervently, "oh, yes."

"So if you had to give up your own desires for the sake of the unborn, naturally you'd be ready to do it."

She looked blank.

"Do what, sir?"

"Give up your own inclinations — for the common good."

She had only to say yes, and she'd be home and dry. Instead, to my dismay, I saw the dummy trap I'd set unnerve her, and she hesitated. Then she produced a stupid little evasion.

"Well, Clenty ... we *both* believe life will always be worth living," — she sent a flickering glance across the floor, up the side of the desk, and round the outskirts of my eyes — "no matter *what* happens. And that's say-

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ing a lot, sir, isn't it?"

Saying a lot? The implied negatives in this affirmation appalled me. I must have stared at her peculiarly, because she lowered her eyes again at once, and there was a terrible silence. A taint of heresy lay on the room. She'd done it — muffed it. I knew I might as well dismiss her there and then; only for Clenty's sake I wanted to let her have her time out.

Quickly I retreated into a different topic.

"And if you gained this License" (oh, irony!) "and had your child," I asked, "supposing it was a son, what would you see as his role in adult life? You yourself are a typescript controller; Clenty is a chauffeur-guard: both of you are employed by the Public Services. Would you like your son to follow along either of those lines?"

"That would depend sir...."

She was groping for words, upset, presumably, by the massive pause that had followed her last answer.

"On what?"

"On what he wanted. The Public Services are safe, and the work's useful, but then...."

"Yes?"

I had a feeling she opened her mouth to say one thing and then changed her mind.

"There's other work that's safe and useful," was all she said.

"By safe — you mean, secure?"

"Work that won't set you thinking in the wrong ways, sir," — said very faintly.

"Of course, of course...."

I gave copious, approving nods. No point asking her what these "wrong ways" were: that might sink her completely.

"But if he did want to chose something else?" I suggested.

At that she looked frightened. I suppose she had been warned that too much ambition for one's offspring is considered an unhealthy sign, subversive, and so on.

"Maybe — a fire fighter?" offered with infinite caution, "or a waste recycler?"

I was all smiles. Good, sensible alternatives. Both of them well within her own class bracket. She saw she'd hit the mark and slumped back in relief. Her time was up, the gentle buzzer on my watch reminded us; so I, too, settled back in my chair and toyed with my set of official stamps to indicate her ordeal was over. Perhaps so as not to appear impatient for the verdict, she stared blankly past me at the wall. A whiteness had spread across her features: I see that whiteness often enough, God knows. It meant my case knew as well as I that she'd bungled — but could she have said where or how? I doubted it.

Life will always be worth living; and that's saying a lot, sir, isn't it?

How in the devil's name could I pass someone who came out with words like that? They smacked of

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something more than naive optimism; there was a kind of defiance in them, even concealed rebellion, the faith of an individual in his own resources...an opportunist biding his time.... Of course, I realized that in my anxiety to make no special allowances in Clenty's case I was being hypersensitive, but would the boys upstairs listening over the recording be any less so? The stupid bitch! I busied myself stamping her papers and discovered I was more than vexed, I was really angry. Clenty was a good chauffeur-guard, who'd got me out of more than one scrape when the car had been mobbed in the Timer areas, and I couldn't reconcile myself to losing his goodwill. Replacing a chauffeur-guard is never easy. Through official channels it takes weeks of explanations, petitions, wheedling; and through unofficial channels, well, who'll swap chauffeur-guards just for the hell of it, when on that man at the steering wheel one's life depends? Damn the boys upstairs with their integrity tests! What was I to do? Staring up at last at those dried flakes of her hair and those eyes, all shut up again, I decided on the only safe solution: a compromise.

I gave her my best conciliatory smile.

"Well, this is certainly a very interesting application, Mrs. Clenty," I said, "but I regret I don't feel now's the right time to issue that License. In another year perhaps? My advice to you is to get down to the Applications Office first thing tomorrow, and take them this—"

I flicked a Re-hearing card across the desk. I produce them down my sleeve very neatly and magically: it's an absurd touch, but, then, most 'Re-hearings' are absurd, (policy is to pass one in two hundred).

I was glad she meant to be dignified about it. Maybe she hadn't expected any other outcome from the start, I don't know. In a flat voice she said, "Thank you, sir," and getting up, she came forward quite coolly to scoop up the card, which she put away in her purse in a quiet, matter-of-fact way that I found touching. My anger subsided. I even looked over her face again with some vague sympathy and found that, stretch a point, I supposed there was a washed-out, bewildered sort of beauty in it after all.

—It would be pleasant—I thought—if I could give her some inkling that I'm not the ogre I appear to be—

So I said, "I know Clenty will be disappointed. It'll be up to you to reconcile him to the wait. You—have any shots left this quarter?"

"I've got four."

"Then use one. Stop off at the clinic on your way home and use one! Give him a real fun wife tonight. Show him sex is a thing of pleasure in itself. That's my advice."

I was trying to help. I was trying to

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show some consideration, and so it still rankles that she shot me a queer, hostile look, almost as though *she* were in a position to study *me*.

"I was going to, sir. Whichever way it went."

"That's fine. That's just fine."

I shuffled the papers, wanting rid of her.

"Good night, sir, — and thank you for your time."

"Good night, and — uh — I don't have to warn you, I suppose, about going ahead *without* a License...?"

She turned back at the door with a sickly smile and shook her head.

"Clenty...we...want to *keep* our child."

"Of course you do."

That was the last case of my shift. I pushed away the file just as Turnover blinked in all the commercial concerns of the City, and the next moment my relief, Brok Holden, came ambling in. I don't like Holden. A bored sadist (that's my personal opinion), who usually sends the women away in tears. While I cleared up, he stood grinning at me and sipping a cup of steaming coffee he had brought up from the autodispenser in the hall.

"Hi there, Winters," he yelped, "how's the population going?"

Every night, the same brainless nightmare question. I ignored it.

"The air conditioning's packed in again," I told him. "Drink that coffee and you'll boil in your own sweat. Good night."

"Hey, wait a minute!"

He grabbed hold of my arm as I tried to pass. Then he turned a trifle pink — so I knew, of course, that he was going to ask some favor. He'd never asked one before, but I knew it, and maybe I'd hated him all along because I knew this day was coming.

"My girl Cath," he began, "—you remember me telling you about Cath? She's a good kid."

"I remember."

I jerked my arm free.

"I remember," I said, "she's contracted to marry that son of the biscuit people. Oatcakes, Ltd. Big money. Big catch. You told me." — and just how many times he'd told me, gloating over the match till I was sick of hearing it. But then, it has to be admitted, these days a family connection with food really is something to gloat about.

Holden was all delight. He slapped me on the back.

"You've got it!" he cried, "you've got it! That's right! You're looking at a well-fed man of the future! Only, listen, Winters, I've hit a problem. This boyfriend's father, he's making waves. Seems to think we aren't class enough."

"Oh?"

(Maybe you're not, I thought.) Now he was plucking at my sleeve, urgently.

"I've got to convince him different. Marrying his son to a License Ex-

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aminer's daughter — that's nothing to sniff at, is it? See what I mean?"

"Yes, I see," I said, making another attempt to push past, "but I'm running late tonight, Holden. Tell me about it another time...."

"...But, hey, wait...now I've got the chance....or, well, *you* have...."

"*Me?*"

That pulled me up short.

"None of this," I said frostily, "has anything to do with me."

Holden laughed and trilled, "Well, yes and no! Big Daddy's daughter-in-law — there's another son who's married — she's coming up for a License next week, *your* case. The thing is, she's got one kid already, so her reasons have got to be pretty special ... now if you ask the right questions, Winters, I'm sure you could...."

"Good night, Holden."

If I wouldn't bend the rules for Clenty, I'd be damned if I was going to bend them for *him!*

This time I simply shoved past, a quick, crude gataway.

Down in the car park I found my chauffeur-guard looking black. Maybe his wife had gone down that way when she'd left me and spoken to him, but if she had, she'd placed both herself and Clenty in the wrong. Public servants are forbidden contact with family during work hours. Probably she'd just made a sign at him from a distance, thumbs down, a shake of the head, something like that. However he'd found out, one glance at that usually placid face convinced me that Clenty knew, and I felt nervous. Was he going to take it out on me? He opened the car door for me without a word.

"Thanks, Clenty."

I sounded too loud and jovial. I sounded guilty. Damn it, I'd only been doing my job, surely he could understand that! He settled stiffly into the driver's seat and switched off the radio — he always left it on until I was in the car, to reassure me that he'd heard the latest riot reports.

Naturally, because contact with family is forbidden, I had to presume his ignorance.

"Which way tonight?" I asked, sticking to my habits, "not that roundabout trip by the Europa, I hope! It always feels like the long way to Siberia."

"No, sir."

He gave me a rather formal smile through the mirror.

"Not as bad as that, Mr. Winters. There's trouble on the South Ring Road, though, — the milk factory again. Another raid."

"Sure," I said, "—what's new?"

Someone or other is always raiding that place. It lies close to a three-mile square of Timer flats, so there's always a mass of people roaming about, waiting for their Home-time to begin. It's natural they should get together while they wait, and air their grievances; then the tensions build up, and before you know it there's a riot. For some reason, it's the milk ration these

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Timers mind most. There's an underwear factory in the same district, but you never hear of anyone raiding *that*. I've got a theory about it. Milk upsets them, because it's associated with motherhood and babies, so it's become a kind of symbol for the family and the traditional functions of family, all the things, in fact, that Timers feel their overcrowded living conditions jeopardize. They want more milk, like they want more space — as a matter of family.

Suddenly I wondered if Clenty had this idea too, and I caught his eye in the driver's mirror, which made an awkward moment for both of us. But it also prompted him to answer my question.

"Nothing *new* exactly," he said, "a spot of bother on the river again. The police are doing another clean-up down there. So we'll go home the long way, over the lower bridge, if that's all right with you, Mr. Winters."

"Fine, fine... I thought they did the river last week."

"They did. That was drugs."

"And tonight?"

"It's the Plumbers' turn."

He meant the scum abortionists, with no State training, no permits. They live in their hundreds on the shackboats, along with every other kind of trickster, practicing dubious skills at outrageous prices. No one in their right mind would go to them if they thought they had any choice, but that leaves plenty of customers. It's like this: when a woman's been refused a License but told she stands a good chance the following year, nine times out of ten, she believes it. She wants to be a good, law-abiding citizen and wait. But sometimes she's so upset that a couple of contracs get missed by accident, a wishful-thinking, Freudian slip of an accident, and the next thing she knows, she's pregnant. Of course, the sane thing to do in those circumstances is to go along to a State clinic and have the problem dealt with. It's all over in an hour: her slip-up is just another number in the archives, and that's the end of it. But the ignorant people won't believe that. They've got it into their skulls that the License Office is informed and the abortion will be held against them at their Re-hearing, which is rubbish, since, as I said, the "Re-hearings" are largely sham in any case (although it goes without saying, we can't admit that). Even if they weren't, I doubt whether a small thing like a slip-up would tip the scales one way or the other. There are too many dud contracs about. But there it is: the Plumbers spread the stories, because that's what makes their business.

Clenty was just edging the car out into Gerald St. Now that we'd settled on the route, I supposed I might as well get on with it and broach the subject that was on both our minds.

"You know, Clenty," I began, "I've just seen your wife. Very attractive. You're lucky."

He took his time about replying.

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"Thank you, sir. Yes, she's all right."

"I'm afraid...." I wished I could see his face properly. "I'm sorry to say I had to disappoint her — and you. Just for this year, you understand."

"Oh?"

That was all he said, just "Oh?" glancing quizzically at me in the mirror. It struck me as an odd reaction from a low-ranking employee, and I was suddenly appreciative of the bullet-proof glass partition between us.

"Had no choice, Clenty. These interviews are recorded. I *wanted* to pass her — but she made a comment about the future that smacked of...."

I hunted for a suitable word, decisive but not terrible, and while I was still hunting, he surprised me by saying gruffly.

"I suppose she tried to be too damn clever."

It was astonishing and gratifying. He sounded half on my side! I did my best to reassure him.

"Well, I wouldn't go as far as that....just a touch of unfortunate — ambiguity? — in her choice of words. I've given her a Re-hearing at the earliest date, a year from today, and I must say, she took the whole thing very well. And *that's* very, very good for the file...."

At this difficult moment, we'd reached the turnoff by the Barkside State Nursery. Of all the nurseries I've visited, I think this one is the worst. Its Edwardian, elephantine buildings are crowded fit to burst with kids who sleep three to a bed in long, damp corridors. The sanitary arrangements are minimal, and I don't see things getting any better. More unlicensed children are born every hour, and even though it means losing their jobs and forfeiting any hopes of future privileges, there are still plenty of people too dumb or too noble to do away with the little bundles. Then the State has to step in, pull the family apart, and house the offspring here, in grandiose squalor at huge expense. Secretly, I know, the Government would love to leave these children with their mothers, but it can't be done: we have to enforce the License somehow, and, however inefficient, punitive measures still make the best prevention of License dodging. Where would we be without them, when even now we've hardly room to breathe?

Clenty made no comment on my optimistic remarks. I guessed he was remembering all those times he'd saved my life, pulling me out of mobs or driving me safely home through riot areas. But now I couldn't or wouldn't do this one thing for him. And when I imagined those thoughts going round inside his head, I wanted to apologize all over again, only I didn't dare. It would make me appear frightened. When you can't trust your chauffeur-guard, you're in trouble; when you show it, you might as well put a gun to your head yourself.

Suddenly he surprised me again,

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shaking his monstrous head and saying, "Pity you have to interview the *women*, sir."

Thank God! He really did blame her, not me! I went clammy with relief. I wasn't about to lose him after all. But his remark was most unusual. Most Timer couples are devoted to each other; they have to be, just to stick together and scratch up the License fee. Until this ride, it had never crossed my mind that Clenty might be anything less than entirely satisfied with his wife. Under his breath he said something like, "I knew she'd louse it...."

I began to glow with amiability. My appreciation of Clenty increased a hundredfold, and I grew expansive. I said, "Oh, yes, I can understand how you feel, Clenty! But you know women — they don't see things like us. They're not rational. And that's why we interview them. There isn't time to examine both partners, and so we have to go for the less stable factor."

"The less stable factor," I heard him repeating my words bitterly. Obviously, none of this was news to him, I realized that, but still, I thought, it might be soothing to hear things spelled out, to hear the reasoning behind the system. So I went on: "You see, Clenty, if the woman's attitude is sound, we can be fairly sure that the man's will be, too. But it's never safe to assume the reverse."

I ventured a smile for him to catch in that infernal mirror.

"Still... don't be too hard on your wife. I dare say it was just a touch of nerves, and next time everything will go beautifully...."

He snorted.

"Next time! Wait till I see her," he muttered. "I coached her till I was blue in the face.... I know it's not *your* fault, Mr. Winters," he added loudly, "but I wanted that kid."

His gloved hands had tightened on the steering wheel — don't ask me how I knew when I couldn't see them. Studying his back through the glass partition, I sensed the compression of anger in his body, his frustration, and I asked myself — how would Clenty treat his wife when he got home? Knock her around a bit? Well, rather her than me.... The truth was, I looked on my chauffeur-guard as a savior, and it was hideous to have to work out his potential as a bully. I remembered the time he had lifted me up and literally carried me over the heads of a crowd of screaming women at a state clinic I'd visited. I forget what had set the women screaming, but I remember they meant business, with teeth, scissors, and nails. Clenty had borne me off in his arms like a child. I owed him something. All I had was advice.

"Try to keep together,' I told him. "I sent her off for a shot. She'll be all wild and high when you get in. Be nice to her. It's tough, Clenty — but life's a sight worse on your own."

"Yes, sir."

After that, I could think of nothing to say. Right along Market St. we

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drove in depressed silence. It was beginning to rain. Bright droplets shone on the car windows. I peered out at the queues that stretched along the pavements, queues for transport, for cut-price drink, for bread tickets, and I felt how good it was to be shut away inside the car, cloistered from all the jostling of the street. Deceptive, how quiet and patient those queues looked from in there. I knew better. They're savage fights for survival. Clenty knows that too, I thought, and it occurred to me that he must enjoy the peace of the car even more than I did. I at least had my own place to go home to. And that thought smote me with remorse. Maybe I'd been a little hard on his wife.

"I'll recommend a Full Share in your apartment, Clenty, when I put in your next work report. You've earned it, and it may help you and your wife...."

"Thanks, Mr. Winters."

But somehow, from the tone of his voice, I knew that without the Child License he thought the extra Home-time pretty meaningless. I didn't try to break the silence again.

As soon as Clenty appeared at my apartment the next morning, I saw that something was wrong. His face had turned grey overnight, that tramp grey which is also something like yellow; and his uniform was crumpled, with rings of wet round the trouser legs. It was obvious he'd been hoofing it round the City for hours. And then, though I didn't say anything, from my window I'd watched him go through the usual morning check on the car, examining it for tampering and explosive packets, and I'd noticed with unease that he went through the motions most perfunctorily, which wasn't like him.

I waited until we were both settled in our seats and he'd turned off the radio; then I asked what was up. There was a long silence. His red eyes stared at me through the mirror, and I detected something new in them — was it accusation? — he blurted out, "She never came home, sir!"

I'm sure I must have turned grey myself. Before I could think of anything to say, he went on,

"I waited till nearly midnight, then I couldn't stand it any longer. I went out...." At this I panicked. I didn't want to know his transgressions, and I cried, "You shouldn't be telling me this! If you go out after your hours, that's your affair, but you really shouldn't tell me!"

He clammed up at once, but, more significantly, he tossed his head in a way that expressed anger and scorn. I began to feel unsafe. To placate him, it seemed best to talk after all.

"Where did you look?" I asked.

"Everywhere. On the rivershacks, in the shot place she goes to — they hadn't seen her; the places where we drink; I tried the police. We've got some friends, but she wasn't there

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either. I even went down the subs. No sign of her."

His voice was low, strained, and I didn't like it. Sure, he was behaving himself, but I got the impression of some huge machine that's sprung a fault in its controls, and I shriveled up in the back of the car, trying to look unaware of what he was going through. These disappearances aren't uncommon. The usual cause, so far as anyone can guess, is fear: fear of going home without that License and facing the husband. The horrible thing about them is that so many of these vanishings are forever. People are wiped out of the City in the blink of an eye. They're jumped for the bag of food they carry, for the decent coat on their backs, because they're pretty or because they're ugly, or just for no reason at all. If you loiter and look unsure which street to turn down at the next junction, you've not much chance.

I decided, for my own safety, to point out to Clenty where the real blame lay.

"She didn't come home," I said, "because she was frightened of what you'd say about the License."

This time he shot me a glance of pure hatred through the mirror.

"Maybe."

He swung out unnecessarily far round a corner, and by now his voice had lost any remnants of civil glaze. "Maybe, *Mr.* Winters. All I know is, if I don't find her...."

—Here it comes, I thought, the threat—

"If you don't find her," I prompted. He kept his eyes on the road.

"This system," he muttered, "I think it—"

He blared the horn at a crowd of manuals fixing road lights. In a small way, I offered peace.

"She'll probably turn up at work," I said. "She won't want to spoil her magnificent record...."

As if any of that mattered now!

"I'll contact her section the minute I get in," I promised him. "I'm sure she'll be there."

"She'd better."

Then I think he made some effort to control himself. He threw me another glance through the mirror, as though he were checking up on me.

"You know, Mr. Winters," he said coldly, "she may be stupid, but I love that girl."

"Of course you do."

I could see already what kind of day I was going to have, squeezing in calls between cases. I'd have to check with the police, the morgues, the Mind Clinics, — a frantic, scrabbling sort of day. The wretched woman had to be found: I couldn't relish the idea of driving home in the dark with Clenty if I didn't find her.

I didn't. I drew nothing but blanks. Luckily, I had no official visits scheduled, which meant that Clenty was farmed out to another department during my shift, and this at least spared me

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the ordeal of giving him interim reports. But, no, I didn't find her, and by the end of my shift, I knew, of course, that I never would. It was already too late. Whatever had become of her, the City had closed over the traces; her papers would be in one person's hands, a forger's probably; her clothes would be somewhere else, on two or three different women; even her bleached, straw-like hair.... No one would ever find her. After my last case (ironically enough, a woman for whom I did manage to issue a License), I sat on at the desk, wondering how to tell Clenty and what would happen when I did. I remembered that look of loathing he'd thrown me in the morning. I remembered his words: "All I know is, if I don't find her...."

Looking out at the sprawling glare of the City, I watched it wink through the Turnover and slowly realized that I felt sick. He could get rid of me in plenty of ways they could never prove deliberate: engine failure in one of the worst Timer areas, where Licenses are as rare as diamonds, or by slowing down in a riot quarter, where they'd be sure to recognize me, maybe down that district where they had the trouble with dud contracs last year.... There were thousands of hands out there ready and willing to rip a License Examiner to pieces, if Clenty would only let them ... and I was feeling pretty sure he would.

Then Holden walked in. He was grinning as usual, over his coffee cup.

"Hi there, Winters, how's the population going?"

I blinked and stared at him. He came prancing into my thoughts like a monkey escaped from the zoo.

"Holden...."

"You don't look too great!" he assured me, "late nights, eh? Up to high jinks?"

"Holden..." I gathered strength, "how'd you like to change chauffeurs... as from now?" At once he grew canny. His drink-sodden eyes twinkled.

"Change chauffeurs, eh? Something up?"

I shrugged, trying desperately to look as if it had just been a whim. His grin grew wider. He didn't ask any more questions.

"Clenty's a good man," he told me.

"First-rate," I agreed.

"Right now?"

"Why not?"

He sipped at his coffee, and its hot fumes made his face revoltingly red. My heart thumped grotesquely. I saw it all now, plain as daylight: if Holden wouldn't come up with the swap, I was a dead man. Waiting all day for news had probably driven Clenty out of his mind. He might not even bother to think up sophisticated tactics but, throwing aside all discretion, just knife me in the throat. Bullies who love their wives are capable of anything

At last, Holden began to nod and fumble in his pocket for his chauffeur card. I sprang up to grab it, and then—

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but how could he fail to? — he said, smilingly, "Look here, Winters, that little business to help Cath...."

I agreed — did I have any choice? Clenty was informed that his wife was untraceable by the Personnel man: I had him summon the chauffeur to his office that night before I'd venture out of the building. And now, with Clenty working Holden's night shifts, I feel reasonably safe. Our paths don't cross much. The only times are shift changeovers, when there are too many people coming and going in the car park for him to try anything. But when we do meet out there, getting in or out of our respective cars, I feel his eyes following me sullenly, and I know he hates me all the more because I chickened out on him.

As for Holden, these days the weasel seems to adore me, though actually it's himself he adores for having discovered I'm as bent as the rest. It's nothing to him that my price happened to be a little different, namely a question of my life. So far as Holden's concerned, bent is bent, and that's convenient. He celebrates the fact with brash gestures of friendship.

I had to concoct a specially foolproof interview for the oatcake people's daughter-in-law, and to this day I don't know how the boys upstairs failed to see through it, but apparently they did, and she got her second License. So Cath got the son, so Holden's putting on weight. Winners all round.

And myself? Well, straw-blonde women still upset me. They make me nervous, and I've even been known to funk a case when it's one of them. Then I worry about Clenty sometimes — but at least I'm alive, hanging on by my fingernails, though, officially speaking, don't ask me why I bother. Off the record, I suppose it comes down to what his wife said, doesn't it? Life's always worth living.

QUESTION: But why couldn't she face Clenty, if she believed that? And if she didn't believe it — for Christ's sake — why did she say it?

I don't understand women.

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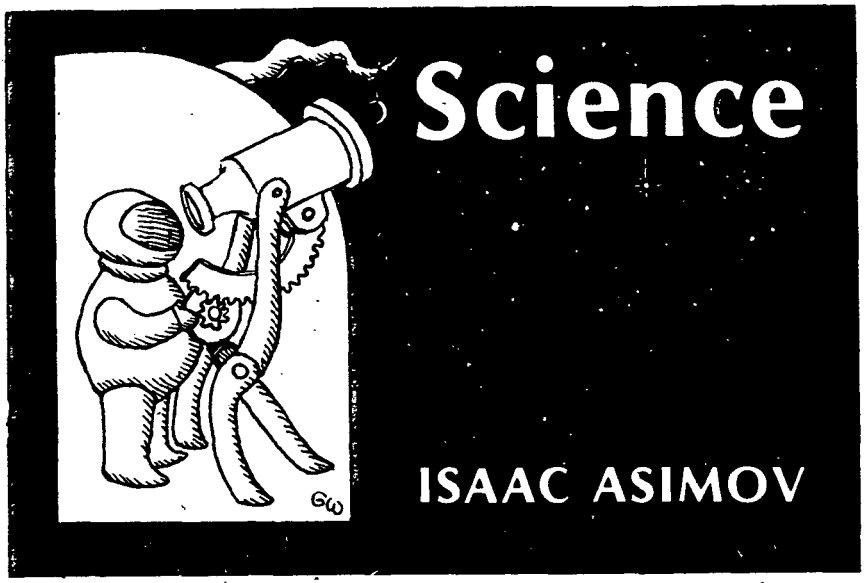

COUNTING THE EONS

In the Book Review section of (as I write) today's Sunday *New York Times*, there is an article entitled "What the Chinese Are Reading," written by Lloyd Haft of the University of Leyden in the Netherlands.

I began to read the article with one question in my mind which was (as you can all guess), "Are they reading me?"

My hopes rose when at the end of the first page, it was stated that at a certain Book Fair in China, there was, on the blackboard, a chalked introduction to a particular branch of literature. It was entitled, "What is 'Science Fiction'?", and the description was not bad at all. It was, however, in connection with a display of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and, as I read on, I found that modern science fiction was not mentioned, unless you want to count Saul Bellows' *Mr. Sammler's Planet.*

I kept on, rather dispirited. Toward the end of the article, mention was made of a new Chinese magazine "Dushu" (Reading") which dealt with non-Chinese books. Then came a magic sentence: "Among the books recently reviewed were *Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Isaac Asimov's *In Memory Yet Green* and Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold.*"

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I was delighted. The Chinese had indeed heard of me.

And yet *In Memory Yet Green* is not one of my works of fiction, or even one of my ordinary words of non-fiction. It is the first volume of my autobiography, one in which I was incautiously frank. I couldn't help but realize that now everyone knew how old I was—even the Chinese. The undeniable fact is that I was born on January 2, 1920.

In fact, Doubleday made that uncomfortably evident, for when they published the book in 1979, they placed under the title, the printed notice "The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov, 1920-1954" and surrounded it with a black border. This must have led many people to say, "Poor man! Died at 34! Who's been writing all those books under his name in the last quarter-century, I wonder."

The second volume of my autobiography came out in 1980. It is entitled *In Joy Still Felt* and has the subtitle "The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov, 1954-1978". Now people will say, "Poor man! Died at 24! How did he manage to write all those books in his short lifetime?"

Well, I didn't die in 1978 either, you bunch of wise-guy kids, but if I've got to brood about having entered early middle-age, I can make up for it by taking up the matter of objects even older than myself.

The Earth, for instance.

How old is the Earth? Prior to the 18th Century, in our western tradition, people relied on the Bible, and from what data it gave us, most calculations seemed to make it six or seven thousand years old. The most familiar of these calculations is one made by Archbishop James Ussher of the Anglican church who, in 1658, calculated, on the basis of his Biblical studies, that the Creation of the Earth took place at 8 P.M. on October 22, of 4004 B.C. (I don't think he specified Greenwich Mean Time. Perhaps he assumed the Earth to be flat.)

The first person in our western tradition to attempt to probe back beyond this Biblical limit was the French naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon who, in 1745, dared to suggest that the Earth was created not by the word of God, but by the collision of a massive body (which he called a "comet") with the Sun. He guessed that this had happened 75,000 years ago, and that life came into being perhaps 40,000 years ago. It was a very daring suggestion for its time, and it got him into some trouble with the theologians. Fortunately for himself, Buffon was not one of your hard-line controversialists, but knew how to retreat gracefully in the face of Ignorance waving the Bible.*

**Ignorance has been waving the Bible ever since. Even today, there is nonsense called "scientific creationism" that is trying to foist itself on our school-children.*

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Next came the Scottish geologist, James Hutton, who, in 1785 published a book called *Theory of Earth*. In it, he carefully described the slow changes taking place in the Earth's crust today. It seemed clear that some rocks were laid down as sediment and then compressed into hardness; other rocks made their appearance as molten lava from Earth's depths and then cooled into their solid shape; exposed rocks were worn down by wind and water. It all happened with excessive slowness.

Hutton's great intuitive addition to all this was the suggestion that the forces now slowly operating to change the Earth's surface had been operating in the same way and at the same rate through all Earth's past. This is the "uniformitarian principle."

In the following decades, geologists began to try to use the uniformitarian principle to calculate the age of the Earth, or at least of some geological phenomena. They made rough calculations as to how long it took to lay down an observed thickness of sedimentary rock, how long to form a particular river delta out of the mud carried downstream by the river. While the calculations were approximate at best and required a bit of guesswork here and there, it seemed quite obvious that to account for what existed on Earth, its age would have to be not in the tens of thousands of years as Buffon had thought, but rather in the hundreds of millions of years.

Consider the ocean, for instance. It is 3.3 percent salt, and this salt, it appeared, was brought into the ocean at a trifling rate by the rainfall that scoured the continents, dissolved traces of material from the rocks and soil, and then carried those traces to the ocean.

If one calculated the salt content of rivers, went on to calculate how much water (and therefore how much dissolved salt) the rivers delivered to the ocean each year, and assumed the oceans had started off as fresh water, it could be calculated that it would take about 1,000,000,000 years for the ocean to get as salty as it is now. That would mean the Earth was at least a billion years old, or at least one eon old, if we define an eon as a billion years.

Some geologists would not accept the uniformitarian theory and yet could not deny the age of the Earth. They suggested a series of catastrophes ("catastrophism"), each one shaping a new planet, with the last version of the planet being that of Genesis. William Buckland, an English geologist who was also in holy orders, held firmly to the Bible, but admitted there might have been millions of years during which a "pre-Adamite" Earth had existed.

One of Buckland's pupils was Charles Lyell. He was a uniformitarian,

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and his *The Principles of Geology* published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833 destroyed catastrophism.

A long age for Earth based on geological observations pleased the biologists, who, in the course of the first half of the 19th Century, were coming to understand that there were forms of life that had lived and died on Earth many, many years ago. Evolutionary notions were in the air, and more and more biologists were beginning to dare theological thunder by supposing that life had not been formed in the twinkling of an eye by divine fiat but had very slowly evolved as a result of tiny, cumulative changes.

This reached its climax with the English naturalist, Charles Darwin, a friend of Lyell who had been greatly influenced by his book. In 1859, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, which removed divine intelligence from the task of creating Earth's present life-forms and substituted random and slow-moving evolutionary change. For that, the one thing that was needed was time, and lots of it. A billion-year lifetime for the Earth was none too long.

Against the combined force of geology and biology, however, were physics and astronomy. In the 1840s, the law of conservation of energy came to be accepted by physicists, with the German physicist, Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz, the most influential advocate. Helmholtz undertook the problem of determining the source of the Sun's energy.

Until then, no one had cared much. Earthly fires needed a constant feeding of fuel, but a heavenly fire was assumed to obey other rules, and it was an article of faith that the heavens were perfect and unchanging, at least until God was pleased to put an end to them.

But Helmholtz, following the law of conservation of energy, knew that the Sun's energy, poured out ceaselessly in all directions throughout history (and with only a vanishingly small fraction of it stopped by Earth, while the rest tumbled wastefully out into empty space) required a source—and a vast one.

By 1854, he had come to the conclusion that the only possible source (given the knowledge of the day) was contraction. All the substance of the vast Sun was tumbling inward toward its center under its own gigantic gravitational pull, and the kinetic energy of that enormous fall was turned into radiant energy. This might sound as though the Sun had not long to shine, but so enormous was it that a contraction of a mere ten-thousandth of its radius would supply it with a 2,000-year quantity of energy, at the rate it was radiating that energy.

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Over the entire duration of civilized man, the necessary shrinkage of the Sun required to have kept it shining would have been quite small, and certainly unnoticeable to the casual observer.

What, however, if vast ages of prehistory were included? The Scottish physicist, William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin) calculated that if the Sun had been radiating at its present rate for 25,000,000 years, then to supply energy at its present rate during all that period it would have had to shrink from a radius of 150,000,000 kilometers to its present radius of 1,400,000 kilometers. And if the Sun's radius were 150,000,000 kilometers at some time in the past, its vast bulk would then have filled the Earth's orbit, and the Earth could only have been formed and cooled once the Sun had shrunk to a considerably smaller size. By this reasoning, the Earth could not be more than 25,000,000 years old.

Kelvin tackled the problem from two other angles. He was aware that tidal friction was slowing Earth's rotational speed and that, in the past, it had rotated more quickly than it does today. When it was hot enough to be molten, Earth's rotation produced an equatorial bulge. Kelvin calculated at what speed the Earth would have to rotate to produce an equatorial bulge of the size that actually exists. That turned out to be a rotational speed that the Earth had about 100,000,000 years ago, and so that was about when it would have had to solidify.

Finally, if Earth had been originally part of the Sun, as astronomers at the time suspected, it would have begun its life at the temperature of the Sun—say 4500 C. How long would it have taken for Earth exterior layers to cool down to their present pleasant temperature? Kelvin decided again that the probable answer was 100,000,000 years, but toward the end of the century, he recalculated his figures in the light of newer knowledge of the physical properties of the Earth's crust and decided it might be as little as 20,000,000 years.

Through the second half of the 19th Century, then, physics, the most respected and irrefutable of the sciences, gave Earth a life time of not more than 0.1 eons and possible as little as 0.02 eons, much to the discomfort of the geologists and biologists, who wanted and needed a much longer lifetime.

In 1896, however, radioactivity was discovered and physics was suddenly revolutionized. For one thing, a new source of energy was discovered. It was eventually called "nuclear energy" when, chiefly as a result of investigations of radioactive substances and their radiations, it was

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found that the atom had structure and that most of its mass was included in a very tiny nucleus at its center.

Each radioactive atom, as it broke down, gave off only a microscopic bit of energy, but all the atoms in the Earth's crust as they broke down, bit by bit, gave off enough energy to keep the Earth's crust at its present temperature indefinitely. That ruined the value of Kelvin's calculation. The Earth could have been at solar temperature over a billion years ago, might have colled off rapidly in 20,000,000 years to its present temperature, then reached a point of stability and cooled off only very, very slowly thereafter.

The British physicist, Ernest Rutherford, who was soon to discover the atomic nucleus, announced the role of radioactivity in this respect in 1904, with the aged Kelvin himself in the audience. Rutherford was very aware of Kelvin there and when he came to the crucial point and saw Kelvin's baleful 80-year-old eye upon him, he quickly pointed out that Kelvin himself had said his conclusions were correct only if some unknown source of heat were not discovered. Kelvin's astonishing prediction was correct, said Rutherford; a hitherto unknown source of heat *had* been discovered. Thereupon Kelvin's face relaxed into a smile.

(Nevertheless, Kelvin was not flattered into accepting the new view. He died in 1907 and to the end refused to accept the new-fangled notion of radioactivity.)

The other arguments for a short-lived Earth also failed. It was quickly realized that nuclear energy offered a much more likely source for Solar radiation than anything else did, and the whole notion of a Helmholtzian contraction of the Sun was thrown on the window. If physicists relied on nuclear energy instead, the Sun might well have been shining for an eon or more without any noticeable change in size. The actual details were worked out in the 1930s.

As for the Earth's rotation and the size of the equatorial bulge, that assumed that once the Earth solidified, its crust underwent no further major changes. Evidence accumulated, however, of the reverse and Kelvin's argument was abandoned. The discovery of plate tectonics in the 1950s and 1960s was the final crusher in this respect.

Rutherford, in his studies, showed (again in 1904) that a particular variety of radioactive atom broke down at a fixed rate. Any single atom might break down at an unpredicted moment, but a very large number of atoms of a particular variety, taken together, followed the rules worked

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out for what is called "a first-order reaction."

In such a reaction, half the atoms would have broken down after a certain interval of time, say x years. Half of what remained would break down after an additional x years; half of what then remained after yet another x years, and so on. That period of x years, Rutherford called the "half-life." Each variety of radioactive atom had its characteristic half-life, from very short to very long.

It turned out to be not a difficult task to determine half-lives. Uranium, the first element found to be radioactive, consists of two varieties of atoms, uranium-238 and uranium-235. The first has a half-life of 4,500,000,000 years or 4.5 eons. The latter has a half-life of 0.7 eons. The element, thorium, consists of thorium-232 atoms exclusively, and this has a half-life of 13.9 eons.

Again in that same year of 1904, the American physicist Bertram Borden Boltwood produced the final evidence that uranium-238, uranium-235 and thorium-232 are each the parent of a rather long series of radioactive descendents, all the members of which remained in uranium and thorium minerals in a delicate equilibrium if the minerals remain solid and undisturbed.

In 1905, Boltwood pointed out that lead was always found in uranium-containing minerals and that it might be the stable end-product of the series. This turned out to be true. Uranium-238 initiates a radioactive series that ends in stable lead-206; uranium-235 ends in stable lead-207; and thorium-232 ends in stable lead-208.

Thinking about it further, Boltwood pointed out in 1907 that it might well be possible to determine the age of a rock—or at least the length of time during which it remained solid and undisturbed—in this way. By measuring the quantity of uranium and lead in a piece of rock and knowing the half-life of the uranium-238 atoms, we could determine how long it had taken that much lead to form from that much uranium.

There is, however, a catch. Lead doesn't exist only because it is formed from the breakdown of uranium and thorium. Lead exists in the Earth's crust independently of radioactive breakdown. There is lead in rocks that contain no uranium or thorium to speak of and probably never did.

In that case, if we have a rock that contains both uranium and lead, it might be that all the lead formed from uranium and the rock has lain undisturbed for a very long time; or that most of the lead was there from the start and that very little was added through uranium breakdown, in which case the rock might be very young.

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How can we tell what the true answer might be?

Let's consider lead, then. Lead is made up of four stable isotopes: lead-204, lead-206, lead-207, and lead-208. Of these, lead-206, lead-207, and lead-208, might have been there from the beginning, but some might also have been formed from the breakdown of uranium-238, uranium-235, and thorium-232 respectively.

Lead-204, however, is unique among the lead isotopes in not being formed from the breakdown of any naturally-occurring radioactive atom whatever. Any lead-204 that exists in the Earth's crust was present when the Earth was first formed.

Suppose, next, we consider lead taken from sources where there had never been any uranium or thorium present, as far as we can tell. When this is so, the porportion of the various isotopes of lead is as follows:

lead-204 = 1.0
lead-206 = 15.7
lead-207 = 15.1
lead-208 = 34.9

If, in any rock that has both uranium and lead, you first ascertain the amount of lead-204 and multiply that by 15.7, you will determine the amount of lead-206 that was there from the beginning. Any amount of lead-206 present over and above that is there only because of the breakdown of uranium-238. Knowing the half-life of uranium-238 to be 4.5 eons you can then tell how long it took that much extra lead-206 to form and, therefore, how long the rock has been in its solid state.

(Naturally, if the rock were at any time to become liquid, the uranium atoms and lead atoms would move about freely, undergo different chemical reactions, and would separate. It is only while the rock is continuously solid that they are imprisoned and must remain together and in place.)

Any amount of lead-207 present to the extent of more than 15.1 times the amount of lead-204 is there because of the breakdown of uranium-235. Any amount of lead-208 present to the extent of more than 34.9 times the amount of lead-204 is there because of the breakdown of thorium-232.

Uranium-235 is present in uranium to a far lesser extent than uranium-238 is. Thorium-232, though about as common as uranium-238, has a half-life three times as long as that of uranium-238 and, therefore, breaks down with only a third the speed. The result is that uranium-235 and thorium-232 each contributes less lead than uranium-238 does, and it is the lead-206 content that is most useful in determining the age of rocks.

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Nevertheless, it is desirable that all three breakdowns give results that are in the same ballpark, as otherwise there is a strong suspicion that something is wrong.

On the whole, results were fragmentary. The earth is a geologically active planet. The action of water, air and life leave few sections of the crust untouched. Volcanic action and the shifting of crustal plates represent continuous large-scale changes. To find a piece of rock that has remained untouched and solid for a long, long time is difficult.

Nevertheless, such rocks were found, and the results from the various lead isotopes did agree. Some rocks on Earth have clearly remained untouched not merely for one eon, but for two and even for three. A piece of granite from an African region then called Southern Rhodesia and now called Zimbabwe has been found to be 3.3 eons old.

An age of 3.3 eons for Earth represents only a minimum. The Earth's history has undoubtedly been more turbulent in its infancy than it is at present in its sedate middle age. The oldest rocks are either buried more deeply than we can reach, or else they simply don't exist any more. Perhaps every scrap of solid material in earth's crust has at one time or another been melted, cooled, melted, cooled several times during the early stages of Earth's existence so that very little much older than three eons survives untouched—and that only by accident.

How much older than 3.3 eons Earth might be cannot be determined, perhaps, by a study of Earth itself.

Is there any way out?

Yes, there is. All current theories of the Earth's origin assume it to have been formed along with the rest of the Solar system in a single process. In other words, if we knew how old the Moon was, or Mars, or the Sun, we would know how old the Earth was. What we are really searching for is the age of the Solar system.

In general, all things being equal, the smaller the world, the more likely it is to be geologically dead, and the more likely portions of it are likely to have remained solid from the earliest days of the Solar system. This means that we'd more easily determine the age of the Solar system, and of the Earth, if we could analyze the surface rocks of the Moon than by analyzing anything on Earth.

Eventually, in 1969, we reached the Moon, and obtained lunar rocks to analyze. Their ages, at least in the highlands, tend to run from 4.0 to 4.2 eons, older than anything on Earth. Yet that, too, is a minimum. Earlier than 4 billion years ago (and no telling for how long a time before that if we

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had only lunar rocks to go by) the Moon's crust was largely pulverized and destroyed and perhaps to a large extent fused by the collisions that placed all those craters and marias on the Moon.

And there's a way out of that, too. In fact, we had something better than the Moon, before we had the Moon. There are the meteorites—bits of solid debris that may well have been circling the Sun, formed and untouched even while the Moon was shuddering under the final blasts of the matter that coalesced to form it.

Of the two major forms of meteorites, the iron meteorites do not contain significant quantities of uranium or thorium. The small amount of lead they contain, judging from the lead-204 content, have been there from the start.

The stony meteorites, however, contain uranium and thorium in sufficient amounts to make an age-estimation possible, and they prove to be about 4.5 eons old. This, by an odd coincidence (and it is nothing more), is just enough for half the original uranium-238 content to have broken down.

There are other methods of determining the age of the Solar system, and it isn't necessary to go into them. The important thing is that they all agree surprisingly well so that astronomers are confident that the Solar system (and the Earth) is 4.6 eons old—4,600,000,000 years.

That means that the oldest rock we have yet found on Earth has been solid and untouched for 72 percent of Earth's total history.

And yet that's just the Solar system. The Solar system is a speck of matter embedded in our Galaxy, and it is in turn just one of many, many galaxies.

Was the Solar system formed at the same time as our Galaxy was, and the Universe generally? Or is our Sun and its train of planets a Johnny-come-lately, born into a Universe already some eons old, or even countless eons old?

We'll take up that matter next month.

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Charles Sheffield is president of the American Astronautical Society and has a Masters in Mathematics and a Doctorate in Theoretical Physics. He has written technical non-fiction and a fair amount of SF, including the well-received novel, THE WEB BETWEEN THE WORLDS. None of which will prepare you for the engaging fantasy below, which Mr. Sheffield says is "my attempt to show what would happen if P. G. Wodehouse had chosen to write a fantasy using his Blandings Castle setting."

The Marriage of True Minds

BY

CHARLES SHEFFIELD

It was one of those mornings where Nature seemed to have gone overboard in her desire for perfection. The sun was shining cheerfully from a sky of cloudless blue. Summer flowers nodded their heads with proper appreciation of the light breeze, birds sang, bees droned smiling in and out of the blossoms, and lambs skipped through the long grass. A morning, in short, where man and setting were in tune. So it seemed to Clarence, ninth Earl of Emsworth, as he leaned over the side of the pigsty, silent and admiring.

The object of his devotion looked to be full of the same blithe spirit. She was standing contentedly at the trough, busily working her way through the fifty-seven thousand, eight hundred calories that Wolff-Lehmann assures us is the appropriate daily intake for any pig who insists on the silver medal and will not take no for an answer. Turnip tops, bran mash, potato peelings and windfall apples were falling before her onslought, like the Assyrian after a bad night out with the Angel of Death. The Empress of Blandings was in rare form, and the Earl watched in fascination. With that inspired attack, he felt, next week's contest in Bletchingham would be no more than a formality, a simple matter of a rubber stamp on an already assured decision. God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world, thought Lord Emsworth; or at any rate he might have, if his memory for poetry had been a little better.

Which shows that even ninth earls can be wrong and that there may be a worm in the most attractive apple. The Blandings worm, in fact, had just popped his head up over a hedge forty yards from the sty and was watching closely. Observers familiar with the

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local scene might point out that the newcomer, worm or no worm, bore an amazing physical resemblance to George Cyril Wellbeloved, late pig-keeper at Blandings Castle, and but recently removed from the Earl's employ for the ghastly deed of pig nobbling. George Cyril, although he had encountered no difficulty in finding alternative employment, did not look happy with his new position. All may have been sunshine and brightness in the world at large, but in the heart of the pig man there was no light, save what from heaven was with the breezes blown. He had the look of a man whose employer had ordered him to win the Bletchingham Fat Pigs' Contest with a mere shadow of a pig, a puny porker whom the Empress of Blandings outweighed by a good ten stone.

It could not be done, thought G.C. Wellbeloved. Judging from the sounds that came from the sty, the contest was becoming more one-sided every minute. He ducked below the hedge and snaked back to the gate, where his new employer, Sir Hamish Mackay, was awaiting his return.

"Noo, whut's 'a seetuation, mon?"

Sir Hamish had spent most of his life harassing the unfortunate natives on the Afghanistan border, which was doubtless character-building but offered a Highland Scot no opportunity to learn more than a feeble approximation to spoken English.

"No."

"Nae what?"

"No." George Cyril was not a man to waste words.

"Ye mean we canna win?"

"Yes."

"The Empress is fatter than the Jewel o' Kabul?"

"Yes."

Sir Hamish was also sparing in his words. He retreated briefly behind his substantial whiskers for a moment's thought, then stepped closer to Wellbeloved. He faltered before the effluvium of pig manure that clung to George Cyril like a guardian angel, then firmed his resolve and pressed closer.

"Ye see whut that means?"

"Yes."

"We'll hafta pinch her."

"Yes."

Wellbeloved considered his last response for a moment. It was missing an important element.

"But I'll need a hundred pounds. Service beyond the usual duties."

"A hundred!"

"One hundred."

"Poonds!"

"Pounds," corrected George Cyril.

Sir Hamish looked at the pig man's stubborn countenance and fought a mighty battle within himself. To understand the baronet, it is first necessary to realize that he had not been a lifelong admirer of pigs. Most of his existence, he would frankly admit, had been a sordid waste, pottering about collecting medals and honors. Only recently had the overwhelming

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attraction of black Berkshire sows pierced his heart, and now he was trying to make up for lost time. If money were needed, money would be used. After all, what else was money for? But that decision had to win out over the native thriftiness of a true Scotsman, and the battle was of epic proportions within his sturdy breast.

"Fifty," he said at last.

"No. One hundred."

Sir Hamish sought to look Wellbeloved straight in the eye, with the expression that had in the past quelled the playful spirit of wounded Bengal tigers, but he was defeated by the pig man's sinister squint, which never permitted him to look into more than one eye at a time.

"Grrarrr," said Sir Hamish.

"Right," said George Cyril, recognizing a growl of assent when he heard one. "Eight o'clock tonight, after she's had her linseed meal. She gets quiet then. Money in advance. Don't forget it. I'll bring the van."

He turned and hurried away along the ditch, before Sir Hamish could offer a counterproposal. The latter stood there, fists clenched and whiskers vibrating. Like the poet Keats, he could not see what flowers were at his feet, or what soft incense hung upon each bough. He was thinking of his hundred pounds, and already he was suffering separation pains. No bloodthirsty Pathan, seeing Sir Hamish at that moment, would have risked an appearance before him; and in fact the head that popped up from behind the nearby hedge was not that of an Asian warrior. It belonged to George, the eleven-year-old grandson of Lord Emsworth, and it was clear from his expression that he had overheard the lot.

Under normal circumstances, the lad's reaction would have been to lie low until Sir Hamish had gone, then run off to spill the beans to his grandfather. He got along famously with Lord Emsworth, although the latter sometimes seemed unsure who he was.

Today, however, George had retired behind the hedgerow to brood over the unfairness of the world in general, and of Lord Emsworth in particular. When the editors of a recent issue of the *Champion Paper for Boys* gave full and explicit directions for the construction of a bow and arrow, presumably they expected their readers to follow them. And having followed them to the letter, it was not reasonable to suppose that an enterprising youth should leave the bow untested.

It was blind fortune that decreed that the household cat, after receiving an arrow amidships (fired, George estimated, from not less than twelve paces) should have chosen to leap through the open window, demolishing in transit three potted begonias and a china burst of Narcissus.

Lord Emsworth, under strong pressure from his sister, Lady Constance, had confiscated the bow and a bag of toffees and garnisheed George's

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allowance until the plants were paid for. The lad had retired to the hedge to seek solace from the latest copy of the *Champion Paper* and had been there, alone and palely loitering, when Sir Hamish and his pig man appeared on the scene.

What, you may ask, could an eleven-year-old do with the information he had overheard, other than take it to his older and wiser relatives? Setting aside any question of Lord Emsworth's wisdom, the problem is still a good one. It was pure coincidence that the latest issue of George's magazine should contain an article on becoming a millionaire in six months or less. The men who write for the *Champion Paper* are of catholic tastes — today the key to great wealth, tomorrow perhaps a novel and improved method of catching rats. The fact that the author of the latest article had never managed to make more than twelve shillings and sixpence a week was not mentioned in the magazine.

George's recent studies had told him exactly what to do. He stood up straight and looked calmly at Sir Hamish Mackay.

"I heard everything," he said. "The price for my silence is ten pounds."

Logically, George should have asked for more. Wellbeloved had set his fee at a hundred. On the other hand, ten pounds was the largest sum of which George had any personal acquaintance, and amounts beyond that felt vague and insubstantial. One hundred pounds would have raised questions within him, that logically should have troubled seekers of the Holy Grail, but apparently never did; to wit, what would one do with it if he had it? Ten pounds, on the other hand, would buy an excellent airgun and leave enough over for riotous living. More than that, despite the written advice he had just received, would make George uneasy.

"Grrrrrrr," said Sir Hamish.

It was not this time a growl of assent, but one of frustration. One does not make arrangements for a criminal act, only to have them overheard by a small boy who is the grandson of the victim. Sir Hamish would have sworn that there was no one around when he and George Cyril Wellbeloved had begun their brief conversation, and the boy's ectoplasmic manifestation had been a nasty shock.

Sir Hamish knew he would have to act quickly. However, the Mackays had survived in the highlands of Scotland for hundreds of years, and that called for a certain basic cunning.

"Aye. Hmph. Ten poonds. Ah," said Sir Hamish.

He reached into his pocket as though seeking his wallet and drew out a curiously carved ebony disc, to which a number of leather tassels had been tied. He handed it across the hedge to George.

"Here, houd this while Ah see if Ah ha' the poonds. Houd it soft, noo."

George looked curiously at the

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carvings on the disc's face.

"I say, what are these markings?"

"Spells. Dinna ye worrit ye'sel aboot them."

George had understood only the first word, but it was enough.

"Coo. Magic spells?"

"Aye. Yon's a giftie fra' ma auld serrvant, Khalatbar."

"Coo. What does it do?"

Sir Hamish pulled a much wrinkled piece of paper from his pocket. It seemed to have suffered diverse fates before being used to transmit a written message. The baronet looked at George with a cunning eye.

"D'ye read Pushtu?"

The lad shook his head, and Sir Hamish nodded in satisfaction.

"So Ah'll have tae translate fer ye."

He ran his eye quickly over the document, making the throat-clearing noise that in a Scotsman often passes for reasoned speech. At last he nodded.

"A verra valuable giftie. It turrns a mon tae a creature, when ye gie it a wee bit rubbit."

"Coo." George looked at the amulet reverently. "Any man? Why did he send it to you?"

Sir Hamish peered hard at the paper.

"Aye. Any mon, it's guid for. Ma serrvant used yon tae alterr his wifie's mother tae a croco-dial. He doesna' want her back noo, and he's sent me yon talisman tae pree-vent it bein' used agin."

"Coo."

George looked again at the ebony disc. Compared with that, a mere airgun seemed like an infant's plaything. His eyes gleamed at the possibilities. Fatty Parsons could be a hippo, and Cousin Juliet a horned toad. And what about Spotty Trimble? The potential was enormous.

"Would you sell it? I'd take it instead of ten pounds."

Sir Hamish rolled his eyes, wiggled his whiskers, bared his teeth and otherwise registered shock.

"Sell it? Ma laddie, yon's worrth a forrtune. Sell for ten poonds? Ah'd be gie'in' it awa'."

"Then I'll just have to go and tell grandfather what you'll be doing tonight."

"Houd on." Sir Hamish held up his hand. "A' right, ye win. Ye can tak' it. But mind noo, nae worrd aboot ony o' this. Gang awa' wi' ye."

George grabbed the amulet and did his instant disappearing act behind the hedge. Sir Hamish breathed a sigh of relief at his wallet's close escape, smiled a horrid and whiskery smile, and set off for the gate. As he went, he threw away Khalatbar's request that Sir Hamish obtain for him a commission in the Coldstream Guards. It had, contrary to all logic, served a useful purpose. Now there were serious pig-pinching arrangements to be considered, if the Empress were to be in his possession before the day was done.

* * *

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George was Lord Emsworth's flesh and blood, and it was no more than natural that they should share a few traits of character. The lad had avoided the general dottiness and absent-mindedness of the ninth Earl, but he had inherited his singleness of purpose. When Lord Emsworth went over to the pigsty to look at the Empress of Blandings, that is exactly what he did. If there were no interruptions, he would stand there happily until it was too dark to see, then stay to listen. In the same way, George now had his mind set on a fair test of the talisman, and he proposed to employ it, like Oberon's love potion, upon the next live creature that he saw. Fatty Parsons, Cousin Juliet, and Spotty Trimble were perhaps more intriguing targets, but the figure of Lord Emsworth, still bending over the sty, had the great advantage of immediacy.

George hurried closer, rubbing the talisman against his pullover.

The Empress had inexplicably stopped eating. Lord Emsworth was mentally urging her on with all his inadequate powers of mind, and at the same time he had thrust one hand into his jacket pocket. Encountering George's bag of toffees, some primitive childhood instinct led him to remove one, unwrap it, and lift it to his mouth.

The life of a prize pig is not particularly exciting. The high point of the Empress' week was likely to be signaled by the discovery of an unusually juicy turnip, or a better-than-average pail of potato peelings. But in that bland catalog of days, unenriched by strange events, one had stood higher than the rest. A visitor had once thrown into the sty a bar of Devon toffee, that had accidentally been dropped in the mud. Now, that ambrosial fragrance was again wafting to her nostrils. The Empress yearned towards it, as the hart after the water-brook, at the same time as Lord Emsworth, toffee poised before his lips, willed her to eat. George rubbed the talisman.

Nothing happened. His grandfather stood there still, in human form. George felt that old sinking feeling. For the first time, he began to appreciate the meaning of the phrase *caveat emptor*. Sir Hamish, the cunning haggis-eater, had tricked him into accepting a useless bit of carved wood instead of ten pounds.

George turned and ran back towards the gate. It might be too late to reverse the decision, but he had to give it a try. At the very least, he would have to learn Pushtu to make sure this sort of thing did not happen again.

Back at the sty, matters apparently ran on much as before. It may be, as the gents who specialize in studies of animal intelligence assure us, that a pig has no capacity for abstract thought. Its perceptions of matters intellectual, they assert, are dim and confused, and it can think of only one thing at a time. But for many years, friends and relatives had been saying much the same thing about Clarence, ninth Earl of

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Emsworth, and in rather stronger language. From a line purified by centuries of inbreeding, no one expects too much in the way of brains. Even so, many people felt that Lord Emsworth, with a power of mind that had on occasion been compared unfavorably with that of a boiled potato, took the matter to extremes.

This mental lack now stood the ninth Earl in good stead. Many men finding themselves on all fours inside a pigsty might be perplexed, even alarmed. Not so Lord Emsworth. Two feet in front of his snout stood a cornucopia of interesting food, and it all smelled delicious. A few turnip tops as hors d'oeuvres, he thought, and then perhaps twenty or thirty pounds of bran mash as a nice entree. Deep within, Lord Emsworth sensed the vast eating potential of his new form. He pushed his head forward and took the first mouthful.

It was exquisite; better, in his judgment, than the *cordon bleu* of Alphonse at the Astoria on even a very good day. The sun shone warm on his broad back, and from the corner of his eye he could see a patch of squishy mud that looked ideal for a post-prandial wallow and nap. The peace that passeth all understanding filled his soul. He was perfectly happy.

The Empress, on the other hand, was a good deal less contented with her lot. Although the Earl, never a slave to fashion, was dressed for comfort, the clothing felt strange against her skin. She wriggled about uncomfortably inside the itchy shirt and trousers. Then there was her new shape. It was wrong in a number of ways, shorter here and longer there. If Richard III had popped up next to her outside the sty, to complain that Nature had shaped his legs of an unequal size and disproportioned him in every part, the Empress would have applauded and joined in the chorus. The only advantage of her new posture was a view of the kitchen garden, denied to her from lower levels. It was a sight that no prize pig, however transmogrified, could ever resist. She turned and slowly made her way towards a laden plum tree.

It was there, twenty-seven plums later, that Lady Constance found her. Lord Emsworth's sister was not dressed for comfort. She was heading for London, and her hat alone had denuded the ostriches from a large portion of the African continent.

"There you are, Clarence," she said benevolently. There was nothing like a trip to the big city to tone up the system. "I see the plums are ripening nicely, but it looks as though the birds have been at them."

The Empress grunted companionably. Lady Constance had never been one to stand there and dish out the rotten potatoes with her own fair hand, but her tone was friendly and the Empress was of a naturally kindly disposition.

"I have asked Beach to serve tea on the terrace," went on Lady Constance.

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"With the weather so beautiful, it seemed a shame to remain inside. Come along, Clarence. I'm afraid I will not be able to join you, since my train leaves in thirty minutes."

The Empress grunted.

"And remember," said Lady Constance, "you must be careful about the house tonight. Lock all the doors. I have asked Beach to do the same and to check everything before retiring. Julia called me this morning, and apparently the burglars are still at work in the neighborhood. The Bishop lost all his silver just last night."

The Empress grunted again. When Lady Constance took her arm, she allowed herself to be led out of the orchard and over to the terrace, where an ample tea had been set out. Lady Constance looked at her watch.

"I'm afraid I'll have to leave you to it. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

The Empress gave a final grunt and watched as Lady Constance hurried off through the French windows that opened onto the terrace. To some people, grunting might seem an inferior form of conversational response, but not to Lady Constance. She knew her brother well, and he would not in her opinion be easily mistaken for Oscar Wilde. She could recall occasions when Lord Emsworth's contribution to a dinner party had been the single word "Capital," repeated two or three hundred times, and another time when he had described the care and feeding of prize pigs in such relentless and graphic detail that a lady guest of neurasthenic temperament had been led from the room in hysterics. Lord Emsworth had many sterling qualities, and his sister found a grunt to be quite satisfactory.

Left now to her own devices, the Empress found much at the tea table to interest her. Apart from sandwiches, potted shrimps, and several varieties of cakes and jams, the thoughtful Beach had set out a selection of hothouse grapes and peaches. Although rather hindered by her unfamiliar form, the Empress had a fair go at all of these delicacies and pretty much managed to sweep the board. It was only when the last mustard-and-cress sandwich had followed the final dollop of clotted cream down the hatch that the Empress became aware of the answer to the old riddle: What is the difference between the digestive system of an aging peer and that of a pig who has three times won the silver medal in the Shropshire Fat Pigs competition?

A little contemplation of the infinite seemed to be called for. She staggered back to the orchard, lay down full-length beneath the shade of a pear tree, and was soon fast asleep. The servant who came out to collect the remnants of the tea noticed the recumbent form of Lord Emsworth, but her main attention was reserved for the carnage on the terrace table. The *Shropshire Herald* was apt to miss some news items, that she knew, but an invasion of the district by a Mongol Horde ought to have drawn at least a para-

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graph. So she mused, and returned inside as the shadows lengthened across the rolling lawns of Blandings Castle, and the calm of evening descended over house and garden.

Descended outside the house, that is. Inside it, there was a certain amount of ferment — most of it within the breast of young George.

The lad had been thinking about his recent encounter with Sir Hamish, and it was becoming increasingly apparent to him that he had been manipulated, as clay in the hands of the potter. He realized that would not do. The *Champion Paper* had been quite firm on the point; millionaires-to-be never allow themselves to be separated from their earnings by the mere blandishments of a honeyed tongue.

Fortunately, it was not too late. George knew now what he had to do. At eight o'clock, Sir Hamish and Maestro Wellbeloved would observe their tryst by the pigsty, for the purpose of abducting the Empress. Clearly, if George were to turn up there also, return the talisman and again demand a tenner as the price of his silence, the baronet would have no choice but to give it to him. George had heard the yearning tone in Sir Hamish's voice when he spoke of the Empress, and it had sounded familiar. Like Lord Emsworth, the man would be putty where pigs were concerned.

George picked up the talisman and sneaked out of the back door of the castle. The shades of night were falling fast as he approached the Empress' sty, ready for the confrontation.

His timing had been excellent. Sir Hamish had just arrived but had not yet begun the operation proper. For one thing, his accomplice had been slightly delayed by a desire to make the first dent in his pig-pinching earnings. George Cyril Wellbeloved had just emerged from the Emsworth Arms, weaving a little but clearly feeling no pain, and was now making unsteady progress towards Blandings Castle. The other factor that had slowed Sir Hamish was the first sight of the Empress herself. He felt like some watcher of the skies, when a new planet swims into his ken. The Empress made the Jewel of Kabul look like the runt of the litter. Earth, thought Sir Hamish, as he looked on her, had not anything to show more fair. What was that other Wordsworth poem that had helped to make his schooldays miserable? My heart leaps up when I behold, the Empress in her sty. Something like that. He gazed on.

In the sty itself, Lord Emsworth had just awakened from a blissful sleep. He had eaten until even a champion fat pig could hold no more, then enjoyed a refreshing mud wallow and nap. The only cloud on his horizon was the horrid object that had appeared over the side of the sty. Sir Hamish, taking his cue from the wily Pathan, had covered his face with boot-blacking before venturing forth on his ill-deeds. He would have reaped

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applause in the minstrel show on Brighton Pier, but he fitted in poorly with native customs in central Shropshire.

This was the tableau, Man and Pig, that presented itself to George as he approached the Empress' abode. He paused twenty paces short of the sty. Sir Hamish, eyes and teeth gleaming from a coal-black countenance, was a trifle off-putting. Although George was a brave lad, he decided he ought perhaps to give the talisman another chance before taking the next step. He pulled it from his pocket, rubbed it feverishly on his sleeve, and closed his eyes.

It was no use. When he opened them, Sir Hamish still stood there, black and fierce as ever. George girded up his loins, walked forward, and held out the amulet.

"You can have this back," he said. "I want my ten pounds instead."

The sudden appearance of his grandson startled Lord Emsworth. He was already feeling a little dazed by his abrupt return to human form, if that term may be stretched to include Sir Hamish.

"What?" he said. "What what?"

"Ten pounds. You agreed to give me ten pounds."

"I did?

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Lord Emsworth was struck by a sudden thought.

"Is it your birthday?"

"No."

George was beginning to feel a lot more comfortable. Sir Hamish looked fierce, no doubt about it, but the conversation was running along lines already familiar to George from frequent discourse with his grandfather.

"Ten pounds," he repeated. "You owe me ten pounds."

"Right. Ten pounds. Do I have ten pounds?"

"Why not look in your wallet?"

"Of course." Lord Emsworth warmed to the lad's quick intelligence. "Capital idea. You're quite right, there's more than enough here."

As he peeled a couple of fivers from Sir Hamish's wad, Lord Emsworth heard an anguished squeal from the sty behind him. Normally, he would have responded to it instantly, but just now an odd feeling was creeping over him. Even to an intellect as limited as the ninth Earl's, recent events were beginning to seem a little odd. It was, he realized, time for some peace and quiet. A couple of chapters of Whiffle's masterpiece *The Care of the Pig*, accompanied by a beaker full of the warm south with perhaps a splash or two of soda, would go far to restore him.

He pressed the money into George's hand and set a determined course for Blandings Castle. Whiffle's book and the decanter were both in the study, and the sooner he could be with them the better he would like it.

"Here, wait a minute." George was

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pleased by the smoothness of the operation, but he was an honest lad. "I didn't give you back the amulet. It's yours now."

He pressed it into Lord Emsworth's hand, shuddered again at the blackened and bewhiskered face, and made a rapid exit before Sir Hamish could tell him that he had changed his mind.

Lord Emsworth looked at the talisman for a moment, but his attention was elsewhere. He again set his legs in motion towards the castle, and again he was detained. The figure of George Cyril Wellbeloved now stood before him, clutching at a convenient fence post in an attempt to stop the ground from moving around beneath his feet.

"'s all ready." he said.

"What?" said Lord Emsworth, regarding his former pig-man with little favor.

"'sready. 's all ready to pinch the Empress."

"What!!"

It occurred to George Cyril that, since his own speech was impeccably clear, Sir Hamish must be hard of hearing, or even perhaps inebriated. He leaned forward and put his mouth close to Lord Emsworth's ear.

"Ready to pinch the Empress!" he bellowed, forgetting that pig-pinching is usually regarded as a silent sport.

Lord Emsworth recoiled. There was a certain something in the pig man's aura, overwhelming the usual pig-related smells.

"Wellbeloved, you're drunk. Stop this silliness and get along home at once."

It seemed at first as though George Cyril had found a way to obey the instruction instantaneously. He had immediately disappeared from sight. His big mistake, he realized as he fell into the warm bosom of the ditch, had been to release his hold on the fence post. Shortly before he lapsed into the arms of Morpheus, it occurred to the pig man that the aristocracy follow very inconsistent behavior patterns. In the afternoon they harass you to pinch a pig, and that same night they have lost all interest in it.

With Wellbeloved out of the way, Lord Emsworth set off once more for the house. On the way, he became aware of the amulet that young George had thrust into his hand. It was of no special interest to him, and nuisance to carry. He threw it from him into the orchard and proceeded to the front door. It was locked, but that was nothing to a man of his resources. In a few moments he had fished out the spare key from its hiding place behind the rose trellis. He went inside, and continued steadily to the study and to the combined restorative powers of Whiffle and a glass of liquid refreshment.

And it was there that Beach saw him a few minutes later, as the butler made his rounds of the house in accordance with Lady Constance's parting instructions.

* * *

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Young George had retired to his room immediately upon his return from the sty. He was happy to have his ten pounds and did not contemplate any further action that night. Something attempted, something done, has earned the night's repose, he thought. It was with some surprise that he soon heard a knock on his bedroom door and saw Beach enter. Relations between the two were pretty good, but they did not extend to evening soirees in George's bedroom.

Beach's manner was never exactly festive, but now he looked positively grim. He was carrying a large iron poker.

"Excuse me, Master George," he began. "But are you aware of Lord Emsworth's whereabouts?"

It seemed an odd question. The Earl was not in the habit of leaving an itinerary with his grandson. George shook his head.

"It is most important that we locate him," went on the butler. "In making my rounds of the castle a few minutes ago, I observed a burglar in His Lordship's study. He was unaware of my presence and had even had the audacity to help himself to certain potables there. I have left Jarvis guarding the study door, but I would like to have Lord Emsworth present when we apprehend the malefactor."

George's eyes opened wide at Beach's words. If the *Champion Paper for Boys* had a fault, it was a tendency to dwell on sensational crime.

"Did you recognize him?"

Beach shook his head. "My acquaintances in the ciminal community are regrettably few, Master George, and the man was wearing an excellent disguise. I would much appreciate it if you would run along to the Empress' sty now and see if His Lordship is there."

George started guiltily. "He's not there."

"Indeed. Are you sure? I have not seen him since before tea."

And there, of course, he had George. To reveal one thing to Beach might lead to revealing all, including George's own role in the purloining of the pig. George's reading had made him well aware of the dangers of being an accessory after the fact.

"I'd better just go and look," he said and escaped before further questioning could be applied.

We left the Empress, you will recall, asleep in the orchard. So it may seem unlikely that George, heading for the sty, would encounter anything that looked like his grandfather. The Empress, we might argue, should have stayed put. Pigs, and especially prize pigs, can sleep almost indefinitely, even if they look like peers of the realm. That does not hold true, of course, when they are struck hard on the nose by flying objects. The amulet that Lord Emsworth had cast into the orchard had given the Empress a good

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one, and she came to a rude awakening.

It took her only a second or two to pick up the talisman, decide that it could not be eaten, and begin to look for other diversions. Gadding about is all right for the daytime, but as evening shadows fall the right-minded pig yearns for the comforts of the home sty. Somewhat stiffly — for the ground beneath a pear tree is not an ideal couch for anyone over fifty — the Empress rose and made her way back home. She came to the fence that surrounded the sty and looked in. To her great surprise, she found it already occupied.

The change to porcine form had not pleased Sir Hamish. Putting aside the fact that it may have improved his appearance, we must admit that he had a point. A man who has come to snaffle a pig must be ready for certain surprises, but a change of roles with the swag is not one of them. Sir Hamish had concluded that Lord Emsworth had arranged it and had somehow turned the tables on him.

His suspicion seemed to be confirmed when, after some minutes of standing in the sty, he saw Lord Emsworth's face peering in at him over the fence. He fancied that he could detect a smug look of triumph in the Earl's expression. A man who had trained his stomach to accept Madras curry for breakfast would never know it, but lingering indigestion can produce just such a look. Twenty-seven plums in five minutes would be nothing to the Empress under normal circumstances, but now she was handicapped by the inadequate alimentary canal of a mere human. She did not like the feeling inside her. All she wanted was her straw bed and a few hours of meditation.

And for real satisfaction, she would like to be rid of Lord Emsworth's clothes. They itched and chafed. She reached behind her and scratched at her back with the amulet she was holding. It was nice and sharp, and rather like the pumice scraper that George Cyril Wellbeloved had applied to her in the happy days before his disappearance from the Blandings Castle environs.

George, approaching from the side, did not notice the amulet with which his grandfather had been rubbing his back. His mind was mainly taken up with the odd fact that Lord Emsworth was at the sty, while Sir Hamish was not. Then reason asserted itself. Clearly, the Earl had pottered down there for a late night worship of the Empress, and Sir Hamish was not stupid enough to try and steal the pig under the very nose of her owner.

He tugged at his grandfather's sleeve. "I say. Beach wants you to come back to the castle."

"Mph?" said Sir Hamish.

Not a sparkling reply, but George knew his grandfather's style. He tried again. "Beach wants you to come to the castle."

"Mph?" repeated Sir Hamish, still

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feeling slightly dizzy from the switch.

It occurred to George that he was certainly earning his ten pounds. If Sir Hamish were within earshot, he ought to be ready to double the fee.

"Beach says there's a burglar in the study, drinking your whisky. He wants you to come back and help to arrest him."

Lord Emsworth, approached in this fashion, was likely to ask why Beach wanted to be arrested, but Sir Hamish responded differently. He had been in a pigsty for hours, then suddenly shifted to a body that had recently done awful things to its digestive system. Only one word of George's remarks had penetrated his clouded brain.

"Whisky?"

"That's right, drinking your whisky. In the study. Come on."

George turned and led the way. Sir Hamish trailed along behind him, still clutching the amulet. He felt like one that hath been stunned and is of sense forlorn, but if it were all a dream, at least it was a superior dream, one with whisky in it.

As they left the sty, there was stirring within. The Empress was home again and feeling as though a late-night snack of linseed meal and buttermilk might go down well. She did not see the two visitors approach the castle, where Beach stood on guard.

As a butler, Beach had few equals. If you wanted a man to shoot the crusty rolls around the dinner table or put a baronet in his place with a single raised eyebrow, you should look no further. He had it all. About the only criticism that one could make of that super-butler was of his odd reading habits. Beach was an insatiable consumer of those lurid volumes that one sees on sale in railway bookstalls, with daggers, drops of blood, white gloves and black masks displayed prominently on the cover. The arrival of a burglar at Blandings Castle offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Within minutes, Beach had footmen guarding doors, windows and chimneys, and another by the fuse box. He had already ascertained that the telephone wires had not been cut — much to his surprise. He tiptoed towards Sir Hamish, as the latter followed young George into the castle.

"He is still in the study, Your Lordship," he breathed softly, in a whisper that suggested an advanced case of laryngitis. "Drinking whisky."

"WHISKY!" replied Sir Hamish, getting at once to the heart of the matter.

His voice had been trained on the parade grounds of northern India, where it had learned to compete with the trumpeting of bull elephants and the roar and boom of field cannon. It rang now through the whole castle. So it was not surprising that Lord Emsworth should appear promptly at the study door, a glass of liquid comfort in one hand and Whiffle's masterpiece in the other, to discover the

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reason for the uproar.

Sir Hamish was vaguely aware of a man of dark complexion standing before him. He was much more aware of the full glass of whisky that the burnt-cork character was holding in his hand. After what Sir Hamish had been through, he yearned towards it like Moses approaching the Promised Land. The talisman dropped to the carpet from his nerveless hand. Beach bent to retrieve it and, with the instinct of the true butler, whipped out a muslin cloth from his pocket and gave it an absent-minded but thorough polish to free it from dust.

The most surprising thing of all was the calm way that the intruder was behaving. He had shown no sign of alarm when he appeared, and now he was quietly drinking whisky. Sir Hamish, finding himself after a moment's dizziness in possession of a full glass of heartsease, had not waited to discuss its origin. He stuck his nose in and started sucking it down like a thirsty camel before anyone else in the room could move. Beach realized that he was dealing with what the authorities would term a cool customer.

"Do you wish me to apprehend this man, My Lord?" he asked, taking a firmer grip of the poker.

Lord Emsworth did not reply. He walked steadily forward, past Sir Hamish, and on into the study. During a brief moment of disorientation, his glass had somehow gone from his hand, and his first priority was to remedy that lack with a sizable replacement. He wasn't going to worry about lesser matters until that was taken care of.

Beach lowered the poker. If Lord Emsworth wished to delay action, that was a relief. The felon looked fierce, and of muscular build, and grappling with him would be a task better suited to a chucker-out at a London night club than a well-trained butler. In any case, the visitor showed no wish to escape. He had seated himself in a comfortable chair, opened Whiffle, and appeared to be reading it between swallows. Sir Hamish had confirmed the fact that he was dreaming, and since he was now in one of the good bits he had no desire to wake up.

Clearly, it could not last. Lord Emsworth had reappeared from the study holding another full glass, and now he was ready to re-possess Whiffle and continue his studies. Inexplicably, it was in the hands of a large, hairy gentleman who had apparently just come from an audition for the part of Othello, Moor of Venice. The Earl advanced and stood before the newcomer.

"Whiffle," he said courteously, holding out his hand.

"Aye, Whiffle," agreed Sir Hamish.

"I mean, I would like my copy of Whiffle. I was reading it."

To Lord Emsworth's great surprise, he perceived that the visitor had been reading it too. He had made many attempts to persuade others of his own

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household to peruse the work in detail, but had met with no success. But here, apparently, was a man who was studying the work without coercion.

Sir Hamish looked up from the book and shook his blackened head.

"Nae doot aboot it, this mon's a gee-enius. Would ye see this noo, his deescussin' o' the feedin' mix."

"You read Whiffle?" asked Lord Emsworth. He was a man who liked to be sure.

Sir Hamish nodded. "Aye. Morn an' eve. He's the Masterr of us a.'"

There was no mistaking the reverence in his tone. Lord Emsworth felt the sudden thrill of communion with a fellow spirit. Sir Hamish had expressed his own sentiments exactly.

"Did you ever —?" he began, but Beach had appeared annoyingly in front of him.

"Excuse me, My Lord, but I wonder if you wish me to arrest this intruder."

"Arrest him?"

"Yes, My Lord. For illegal entry."

"Certainly not, Beach. This gentleman is not an intruder. Didn't you hear what he said about Whiffle? Tell me," said Lord Emsworth, turning his attention again to Sir Hamish. "Do you by any chance raise pigs yourself?"

Sir Hamish hung his head in shame. It was a question that seared his soul. "Ah'm tryin'. But it's nae use. Ma piggy's as thin as a wheeppet. Ah canna mak' the Jewel tak' tae the bran mash."

"Ah." Lord Emsworth looked grave. He knew how such problems could bring a strong man to the brink of despair. "I wonder, have you tried adding a spoonful of malt to it?"

"Malt?"

"One tablespoonful to two pounds of mash."

"Ye think it's perr-suade yon tae tak' her fodder?"

"The Empress of Blandings put on ten pounds in the first week I tried it."

"Ten!"

"Ten."

"Poonds!"

"Pounds," corrected Lord Emsworth.

"Ah'll try it," said Sir Hamish. Then he hung his head again. The scales were falling from his eyes, and he realized that only a man of saintly mind would reveal the secrets of superpig raising to a rival.

"But Ah hafta mak' a confession tae ye. Ah was after tryin' tae steal the Empress."

"Stealing her?"

Sir Hamish nodded glumly. "Aye. She's a queen o' pigs. Ah wanted t' tak' her."

"Very natural," said Lord Emsworth charitably. "If she didn't belong to me I would feel the same way myself. But now, about this important matter of the feeding mix. What do you think of the Petrovsky masher? That's what I've been using, but there are still lumps in the feed."

"Aye, Ah ken that. Ye ha' need o'

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the McGillicuddy Mix-Master, afore the mash. Then there's niver ony deeficulty wi' it."

Lord Emsworth blinked with excitement. It sounded like the instrument he had been looking for. He wondered how he had failed to meet this excellent man before, one who knew his Whiffle thoroughly and who, despite a penchant for burnt cork and an apparently incurable speech impediment, was willing to dispense good advice so freely.

"I'll buy one immediately. Beach, get me Whister's of Bond Street on the telephone."

Beach coughed politely. "With respect, Your Lordship, it is now eleven o'clock at night. I am not sure they will still be open."

"Eleven o'clock? Good Heavens, then it's time for the Empress to have her bread and molasses." He looked at Sir Hamish diffidently. "You know, there is a Fat Pig Contest over in Blechingham next week, and I will be unable to attend in person — there's this silly nonsense in the House Of Lords, and my sister will make me go to it. I was wondering. Is there any chance that you would be willing to show the Empress for me? If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

Sir Hamish, overcome with emotion, picked up a priceless Elizabethan embroidery and wiped at his eyes with it. Three woven members of the English nobility were transformed to chimney sweeps.

"Ah canna think o' anythin' finer. Ah'm no worthy o' the honor, Ma' Lorrd."

Lord Emsworth put his arm around Sir Hamish's shoulders and led him to the door. It went without saying that his visitor would want to share the excitement when the Empress embarked on her last meal of the day.

"Call me Clarence," he said.

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Here is a beautifully compressed and chilling tale about Something Strange that happens aboard Marslab 3. Tom Sullivan is the author of a novel, DIAPASON, and several short stories in Omni *and* Analog. *He lives in Lathrup Village, Michigan, with his wife and two children.*

The Fugue

BY

THOMAS SULLIVAN

She awoke. From sleep. From a dream. From ten months of serene space flight and Martian reveries. For a few moments she sobbed, shivered and placed her hands protectively over her stomach. The module was hermetically hot. Frauds of blue blitzed her field of vision. She groped upward through the gluey air to the switch, and real light fixed the cabin. Ugly now. Aftermath. There were the covers on the floor. Twisted. Screaming. She struggled out of bed and caught her reflection in the mirror. Warped symmetry. A crumpled piece of paper—read, written on. A feeling of outrage scoured the last essential dignity from her face: silken brow to corduroy, elliptical eyes to hard blue circles, rosebud lips to boxer's pout. She wanted to scream, but there was no one else on board to hear. No one for 35 million miles. Except *him*.

The radio. Houston.

She spilled into the corridor and floundered to the record room. There would be the inane word gap. But the whole Universe would listen. Her scream, her cry of outrage.

Three minutes tardy, Houston heard. The controller pushed the button to summon help even before he asked her to repeat it. That cry. Tragic, comic, perplexing—"Houston ...I've been raped! For God's sake, I've been raped!"

Ted Dean, project director, arrived at the end of the fifth transmission from Marslab 3. He had a face like a cliff whose terrain seemed to have collected at the bottom in rubbery lips and a loosely gathered jaw. And watery, bloodshot eyes. Falsely innocent. Quagmires of sympathy with metal bottoms.

"Kill the control room audio," he

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said and, after the switch was thrown, allowed himself a string of long, slow obscenities. He had heard enough to know what Rachel Young's spacemate, Mario Russell, had done. "Damn dago stud," he said.

Through the control room glass he saw the duty operators. Faces full of shock. Questions. A rape. God-awful. *Mr. President, one of our astronauts has raped the other one on board Marslab*...He peaked his hands prayer-like over the microphone.

"Rachel...this is Ted. I'm going to tell you what to do. Get a grip on yourself and listen. Do you understand? Uncle Ted is going to tell you what to do about your problem. Roman numeral one, don't get hysterical. Mario may have lost control temporarily. He's probably more scared than you. As long as you remain rational you stand a good chance of keeping him rational. Okay? Number two, let him know that we know. Try to get him to talk to us. And three, we're bringing you back, but don't tell him that. Let us do it. We don't want him to decide he's better off out there than here. Got that, Rachel? Keep calm, tell Mario we want to talk to him, and let us talk him home. Now, I want you to tell me if you're injured in any way and where Mario is now."

Talk him home. What if Mario didn't want to come home? What if he decided to go on raping her? Or to end it for both of them? Ted entertained the fleeting blasphemy that such a murder-suicide would best serve the project if committed soon, before any news leaks. *Space program canceled on account of rape.* Worse than death. A silence would be merciful. Let some future astro-archaeological probe discover a pair of skeletons and wonder about humanity's pioneer history in space. That wasn't ruthless, he thought. Just rational. Covering all the exits.

Six and a half minutes approached. The controller glanced nervously at him. But Ted felt the words swelling in. Perihelion. Now. Now. Now... Radio silence. He swore again. How many times had he endured the acoustics of time in this room? Seconds thudding. "Come on, damn it!" He sighed in resignation. Something unpredictable was happening aboard Marslab 3.

"Put a duty hold on the control room," he said. "I don't want anyone leaving here till I have a chance to talk to them."

No one was going anywhere, but the controller toggled a second mike and issued the directive.

At twelve minutes Ted transmitted a terse order for Mario Russell to acknowledge Houston. "They're together," he prophesied and wondered if mankind had not already committed its first murder in space.

But the interval this time was precise. Mario Russell's normally viscid voice came through thin with dismay. "Houston, we've got a problem..." he

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said. *We've.* Instant reassurance. A conspiracy of problem-solving. Or cunning innocence. "...it's Rachel," he said. "She says she's talked to you already. But just in case she hasn't—well...I don't know where the delusion begins. She says...she acts like and accuses me of...of raping her. I said *raping her,* Houston. What's more, I think she believes it. Right now, she's in the corridor. Won't come near me. I don't know what to say. There was no warning for this. No strains, no hints of stress. I don't know how to handle this, Houston...."

Ted Dean momentarily pitied the frightened little boy in that voice. He pictured the slight muscular curl of Mario's upper lip, the last vestige of a childhood speech impediment, and it intensified the pathos. But he couldn't afford to get sudsy over it. *Mr. President, the second astronaut denies raping the first. Tune in tomorrow for....* Who was lying? That was what mattered.

Rachel would have nothing to gain. But she *could* have cracked up—pressures, frustrations, the secret-wish hallucination. Possibly. On the other hand, Mario *would* have something to gain. The same urges, frustrations. Months of fantasizing. He might believe he could pull it off. Say she flipped. Word against word. Vulpine games simmering in the boredom of space. If that was so, he might go on raping her during the trip home. Eight and a half months. The improbability of it would be Mario's safeguard. But they could order the TV cameras on in the interior, the sound key open.

"Mario," Ted transmitted, "I want you to appreciate the difficulty of my position. I can't take sides until one or the other of you is clearly wrong. Nevertheless, I'm concerned for both your welfares. You can imagine what this can do to the program if it gets blown out of proportion. So, what's good for you is good for us. And right now there's no truth that can hurt us. We expected psychological problems on missions sooner or later, sex-oriented or otherwise. You know we covered that in training. We screened you and Rachel for abstinence, even suggested the option of having relations and put the birth-control devices on board in case you changed your minds. So, no one's going to hold you criminally responsible for anything that might have happened in these difficult...*imposed* circumstances. At worst, you'd have your wrist slapped. I mean that, Mario. If any blame needs fixing, it's *ours.* But you have to cooperate. Believe me, we knew this was a possibility. We call it the 'denaturing factor' in skull sessions. The psychs tell us there's a limit to how much environmental change we can impose without changing behavioral values. You know the crap. Jeez, Mario, you're our guinea pigs. We joke down here about how long we could last without partners. Don't hold back on us now. If it happened, okay. Let us know."

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Aboard Marslab 3, Mario Russell radioed home: "I did not rape Rachel Young."

They turned the cameras on; the transmission stayed open. For the first ten hours of flight, one or the other astronaut transmitted. Interrogation-abreaction. Two parties barely speaking, mediated 35 million miles away. A solemn procession of intellectual hybrids paraded through Houston, listening to tapes, hurling questions across the void with pointless tact. A lie-detector test was suggested. What was the rush? Better to get them home before disgracing one or the other. But the test could be administered subtly—a physical exam—simple monitoring while being questioned. Mario and Rachel would never know.

But of course they did know.

And it terminated the ten hours of loquacious cooperation, of sleepless theorizing, of mental move and countermove, of dutiful reporting to Earth. Houston didn't trust them. Houston was the enemy. Who had made the Dean's list? Each assumed the other had passed the test and been so informed by Houston at a whispered moment when the other dozed.

But how could Houston tell them what it did not understand—that *both* had passed the lie-detector test?

Ted Dean wondered about the Russians and the press and the President. He wondered about himself, the hidden demotions that would ease him out of the space program, the book he might ultimately write. He wondered about Rachel Young. She was intelligent but ignorant about life. A sheltered aristocrat. Her coping with life was somehow theoretical, memorized. Her compassions were for the past or the future. He had the feeling that she collected herself into moments of idealism which shattered at the first brush with the present. Those were the reservations he had voiced to the selection committee in the beginning. But the committee had accused him of seeing all women as delicate and spoiled.

Finally the call from the President came. From Rhodesia. He was on a honeymoon with black Africa. The happy duo orbiting Mars was to tour the continent next year.

"Right now I'm more concerned with security at Houston than what's happening on board Marslab, Ted," the chief executive informed him with air-brushed calm. "Keep it tight there, will you? It's going to have to be that way until we bring them in and straighten this out. Keep it tight. I know you can do it."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Straighten it out. A euphemism for shuffling people, assigning blame, covering up, reordering priorities.

He talked to the President daily for a week, then once a week, then was told to submit a daily report to the President's space advisor and call the White House if anything dramatic developed.

Aboard Marslab 3, two months

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closer to Earth, Rachel awoke. She was beautiful in sleep but always seemed jarred by the trauma of waking. A feeling of awkward indignity had become permanent in her features, and there was a pulse in her belly that faulted her very core. Already it was beginning to show. Too big, too soon. She had told Houston that the morning sickness was just nerves. And it was true. She had deteriorated into a haggard, vomiting creature. But soon they would insist on listening for its heart and sampling her blood and perhaps—this was the real and paradoxical reason for her secrecy—suggesting ways to get rid of it. She wouldn't stand for that. Feared it. Hated child forced into her womb, an everlasting blemish—*yet she feared losing it.*

They were monitoring her food, of course. That was how they confirmed it. On top of everything else, she was even more ravenous than a pregnant mother was supposed to be.

"...I can understand your feelings." Uncle Ted insisted. "You're a woman, after all. A potential mother. But think about the stigma all the way around. Your kid will be a freak."

"Famous for being the first bastard in space, you mean. What's the difference? Your way would make him the first abortion vented into space." *Him.* She knew the baby would be male. "Not much future in that. Anyway, *Mario* is the first bastard...."

The arguments went on, dissolving into airy games. She detailed the final two weeks of confinement on Earth at this refuge or that sanctuary. Uncle Ted impaled her idylls to no avail. The final antiphony was the passage of time. After twelve weeks it was academic.

The shock of her pregnancy was rather more profound on Mario. He acted, looked, genuinely stunned.

"I swear to you...I swear, I didn't do it. I did not do it. Ted, so help me God, I didn't get her pregnant."

"Mario," came paternally out of Houston, "I've got as much imagination as the next fellow, but the possibilities are—alas—somewhat finite. Who else could've got her pregnant?"

Across the millions, Mario shrugged and solemnly maintained: "I didn't do it, Houston...I didn't do it."

Ted Dean went back to wondering. Wondering if Rachel could be experiencing a hysterical pregnancy. Wondering if Mario could have blanked over the incident. A fugue, his psychiatric advisor suggested. An amnesic fugue. Could Mario Russell find such conspiracies in his soul? Ted Dean considered the gently cynical astronaut. Pale-faced, lean-eyed, a patch of dusty hair the texture of fiber glass. He could remember him poking over piles of dogma, elongating like a giraffe. Was it some secret dreamer that looked up startled in his memory? A Walter Mitty? Outwardly Mario was a somewhat myopic, burrowing scholar asserting dominance over a

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mildly athletic version of himself as a youth. But in retrospect Ted could sense a walled-in intensity, a potential for anger—like a docile horse in traces who, suddenly freed, becomes a wild stallion.

It was no longer Rachel who fled from Mario, but Mario who fled from Rachel. She carried her gargantuan indictment in front of her like a slowly opening file cabinet drawer. *See? See the evidence coming at you?* Mario's sensuous lips began to assume a poisoned smile, as if he had just caught the joke played on himself. From Houston it looked like he had lost his balance, and they worried that he might decide to walk home or commit some other act of quiet desperation. But as Marslab neared Earth, Mario made a reasoned demand: "I want a gene screen match-up," he said. "Myself and the baby when it's born."

A sane resolve. Houston would want one anyway. Mario must have realized that. And when the inevitable confirmation that he was the father took place, would he then welcome the fugue theory and yield limply to whatever direction Houston gave? It didn't matter much to the program. Crime or act of temporary insanity, funding for the space program was in jeopardy.

That was one of the reasons they didn't bring them back to Houston. The White Canyon complex in New Mexico offered greater secrecy. There in an embrace of mesas, surrounded by slowly crashing waves of sand, the thorny reunion took place.

"Mario, Mario." Uncle Ted shook his head when they were alone face-to-face. Mario had pictured him shaking his head just like that for eight and a half months. "Permit me to tell you, you look a wreck. Never has a man paid so dearly for his folly."

Mario smiled his memorized smile, now a perfect replica of the genuine article—except that his bleary, blemished irises were glazed.

"I didn't get any folly," he said.

"...and never has a woman been more pregnant than Rachel Young. They say she may deliver early. You just made it to the hospital in time."

"It was a long drive." *Long-g.* He still had a speech impediment.

"Yes. Plenty of time to think. We've all thought a lot, haven't we?" Ted tried to look sympathetic, but he felt as though he finally had an elusive arsonist by the throat. "Yet it's all so simple. Adam and Eve. And then there were three. Not much doubt about the method. What remains is to fix the blame. Was it the snake? First sin? Or were you a victim of psychological circumstances? Frankly, Mario, I don't give a damn which it is. I'm sorry for you, but I don't mind telling you, you screwed *everyone* up there!"

The sting of that flattened Mario's smile a little. He nodded, as if understanding a great deal more than what was being said. "Just give me my gene screen match-up," he said. "That's all I ask."

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"Right to the end, eh, Mario? You know, you'll up-chuck it all sooner or later. Either when we show you the match-up, or on the psych's couch."

That was the hard part, Ted thought. Turning the screws on Mario. But it was the only thing he hadn't tried. Couldn't try with Marslab up. He had to admit he enjoyed it. No man was bigger than the project.

Rachel was next. And he wasn't prepared for that. He thought it was predictable. Apologies and consolation. Relief and quiet grief. But then he heard a brief summation from one of the doctors: "She fought like a tigress. We didn't even get half an exam. I listened to the baby's heart, felt him kick, but the sonar scan showed a blank. A picture of nothing in there. That's when she was struggling, though. To tell you the truth, I can't even be sure it's in there. I'm not even sure she's ever had relations!" And then Rachel blew into his office like a searing wind.

"...if they sedate me, examine me, or even touch me again, I'll scream!" she unfurled over him. "I'll tell the papers. I'll do whatever hurts you and everyone else the most!"

His steady, watery gaze tried to immerse her in sympathy but could not. "Is it the males, Rachel?" he asked urgently. "Because if it's the males, I can line up a female staff."

"No. It's not the males. I don't want *anyone* touching me!"

"Then it's space agency personnel maybe. I'll get a civilian staff for you—"

"No one!"

He tried to reassess her. The one positive aspect of this whole affair was the chance to observe the effects of space travel on pregnancy, and White Canyon was glutted with empirical personae come to examine her. Had that alienated her? Was she blaming them for sending her up in the first place? Or had motherhood simply subordinated the objective astronaut who had blasted off Earth so many months ago? Her stark, egg-shell brow and dark-ringed eyes full of fear and hate did not seem maternal.

"All right," he said. "You've been virtually alone for endless months, and now suddenly you're surrounded by people poking at you. You've gone through the impersonal strain of a space mission. You've had your physical integrity violated. You're carrying a baby you don't want—"

"I *do* want it!"

He blinked, began again more cautiously.

"You're carrying a baby you didn't ask for. A baby that will have no father. Damn, Rachel, if it's any consolation, you're one helluva woman just to keep your sanity! I mean that. But look. There's one more hurdle. You're going to give birth. For most women that would be hurdle enough. Now, how can you have that baby if no one touches you?"

She laughed scornfully at his

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manifest stupidity. "Well, at least I won't be the first in that department," she said.

"Damn it, Rachel, you know what I mean. It's a risk. And this hasn't been a normal pregnancy, now that's a fact."

"He'll be okay. I know it." The baby, she meant.

"Then what about you?"

Cool blue eyes lasered into him. "If anyone touches me, I'll make a mess of it," she said clamly. "I want to leave here this afternoon. And I want to be left alone."

"You know that's impossible."

"It's not impossible."

"What about Mario? He wants a gene screen of the baby. I guess we owe him that, considering your accusation."

"You doubt he's the father?" she sneered. "Well, put your mind at ease. I absolve Mario of all guilt. He didn't do it. It was the man in the moon."

"I can't leave any doubts in anyone's mind, Rachel. The baby's gene screen may jolt Mario into remembering. He has to remember. For his own good."

"What about *my* good? What about my *baby's* good?"

"The gene screen won't hurt anyone."

"It'll hurt me. I don't want it. I don't want any of this. It's tearing me up. I want out of here! I want to be left alone!"

"I'm sorry, Rachel—"

"You rotten son of a bitch, you filthy bastard!" she began to shrill.

He sat stunned while she raked him with accusations and obscenities. Her threats, for the time being, were impotent, but long after her cries had echoed away in the corridor and she had been forcibly confined to quarters, Ted Dean sat at his desk and wondered still more....

Outside, the night wind quickened queues of sand off the desert, a gritty breath against the windows of the base. There was a song to it. A whispered rushing—rising, beating, falling. It was the same song Mars sang. In zephyrs. In planet-wide torrents. Rachel had heard it aboard Marslab 3, coming up from the transmitter on the surface. She heard it now in her sleep on Earth, and it brought back the dream. And the whisper. *You are a mother of the Universe,* it said. *In you is the pansperm. I have found your cell and joined it in mine. Return to your world of oxygen and water, for I cannot enter your atmosphere in my present form. There make me a son who can digest the air, yet who breathes the ether of the stars. In time, his cell will multiply, and we will be one.* The whisper, like the wind on the sand, would leave no clear trail when she awoke. Only the fantasy, the lie about Mario. A memory, it seemed in her conscious state. An event that had happened.

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Rachel opened her eyes.

The contractions had begun. She was bathed in sweat. Reversing her hands behind herself, she pushed and rolled herself upright. They had given her a shot, but it had worn off hours early. How could they understand what carrying *this* baby did to her metabolism, her systems, her rates of absorption? Not that it mattered. There was no way off the base without going through security. But that didn't matter either. The whisper inside her only demanded that she be alone when it happened. To her conscious mind it was a compulsion. *Get away from people. Get away from possible discovery.*

The window was the safest way. The frame crackled over sand in the track. She bent the aluminum screen, pushing it out. Then it was an awkward, lethargic ballet of raising herself on chairs and cushions—like a goose lifting and lowering its flat feet as it snuggled down. Finally she was seated on the window track.

The drop was only waist high. But it broke her water. There wouldn't be time to leave the base, even if she could get past security.

Gathering her robe against her cheek, she stumbled laterally through the braids of blowing sand. There would be lees against the mesas. At one point she heard the distant bark of a dog, but the animal did not come forth, presumably checked by the stinging sand.

The pains were quick, violent now. She fell, staggered up, fell again, and finally crawled to sanctuary. There she braced herself against the earthen spine of the escarpment and spread her legs. The pain was continuous, rupturing. Pant, push, pant, push...*God in Heaven!* It was coming, coming. A huge baby. A superior baby. Sand rained inside her skull, commingling with the visual fraud of a trillion stars. She screamed into the wind. Just before she died, she saw it. Or rather thought she saw it. For there was the placenta, the blood, the indentation of the infant's form moving through the storm. Already mobile. Already self-sustaining.

They found her at daybreak. Ted Dean, Mario and a medic. Somehow the shock was anticlimactic. Rachel—the Rachel they had known for several years—had been dead for nearly nine months.

"Bled to death," the kneeling medic said, looking under the robe. "Baby must've been enormous."

"Then where the hell is it?" Ted rasped hoarsely.

"Someone must have taken it."

"Who?"

The several comments accompanied a slow, group pirouette as they scanned the adjacent terrain.

Ted Dean looked at the medic. "You don't think...that is, the dogs were out here."

"They wouldn't eat the bones," said the medic.

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"I don't think there was a baby," Mario intoned. "I don't think there ever was a baby."

"Hysterical pregnancies mime *some* symptoms," agreed the medic. He was looking at the visceral traces of the birth on the hem of the robe. "But...."

"The dogs," repeated Ted. "Bones or no bones."

"Hysterical," said Mario.

The two men locked gazes. Quagmires of sympathy.

All right, Mario," said Ted Dean. "It was a hysterical pregnancy, and there never was a baby. This poor gal did it all in her head. She went out there for too long, and it got to her. Nothingness is the worst thing you can find anywhere, because you have to fill it with yourself. And that's when you find out what you're missing." He reflected a moment over the childbirth agony written on the dead woman's features. "Rachel crying for her children," he eulogized. "Such suffering. The tricks the mind plays. I'm glad it's over for her. And for us."

Nothingness was what the pansperm had found in the Universe and, with human arrogance, begun to fill with itself. Far out on the desert, the wind shivered along a curious trail of naked prints, miming Uncle Ted's eulogy: Rachel crying for her children.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 25

In the June issue we asked competitors to submit short poems or limericks about fantastic or science-fictional animals. Not as many entries as usual, but the quality was fairly high. The winners:

First Prize

THE *SIPPLE*

The *Sipple* is an alien critter
Resembling most a raw corn fritter,
With seven eyes, ingestion hole,
And tentacles as black as coal.
It doesn't gambol (take no bets!),
Excretes dry waste (it *never* wets).
Its sex is nebulous sensation;
No organs there for procreation.
It moves along without a ripple,
Pushed by the dangling part of *Sipple*.

—Rachel Cosgrove Payes
Shrub Oak, N.Y.

Second Prize

THE WUD

Beware the Wud, its ragged teeth
Can grind you into burgered beef.
Its habits are a gross disgrace.
(It wets itself in hyperspace.)
At seven hundred light years long,
When argued with, is never wrong.

—Mike DeSimone
Upper Darby, Pa.

Runners Up

While circumnavigating Pern
To sate the whim of Lessa,
The dragon Ramoth did discern
A visiting professa.
They gave the man a cup of *KLAH*
And set him on a Green.
And then, to flee the wrath of F'lah,
They vanished in *BETWEEN*.

—Joseph T. Klapper
New York, NY

THE FLEFFEL

The fleffel runs on ceilings.
The fleffel sticks to walls.
Its skin is apple-peelings.
Its eyes are tennis balls.

The fleffel barks like bongo drums.
It nests in chandeliers.
Its favorite foods are pork and plums
And science-fictioneers.

—Bruce Berges
Lennox, Ca.

there was a young man in the dark
who thought he was hunting the Snark;
but his time-machine slipped—
the continuum flipped
and his Boojum, he found, was a
Quark.

—Mary C. Pangborn
Woodstock, N.Y.

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CONKEW

The Conkew is a creature
With a most peculiar feature
Not found in beasts of any other kind.
With its mate, it binds securely
But for life, resulting purely
In one animal known as the Conkew-bind.

—Pat Cadigan
Kansas City, KS

Hunters have found that the
Martian Jobliloquy's
quite a discouraging
trophy to seek.

How do you catch something
quadridimensional?
—all that it does is
regress for a week.

—Sebastian Robinson
Glasgow, Scotland

COMPETITION 26 (suggested by John Brunner)

Please submit up to a dozen "imaginary collaborations," along the lines of:
Year of the Quiet Clash of Symbals, by Wilson Tucker and James Blish
The Man Who Folded the Lomokome Papers by David Gerrold and Herman Wouk
The Mile Long Intersection by Kate Wilhelm and Samuel R. Delany

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by November 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 26 will appear in the March Issue.

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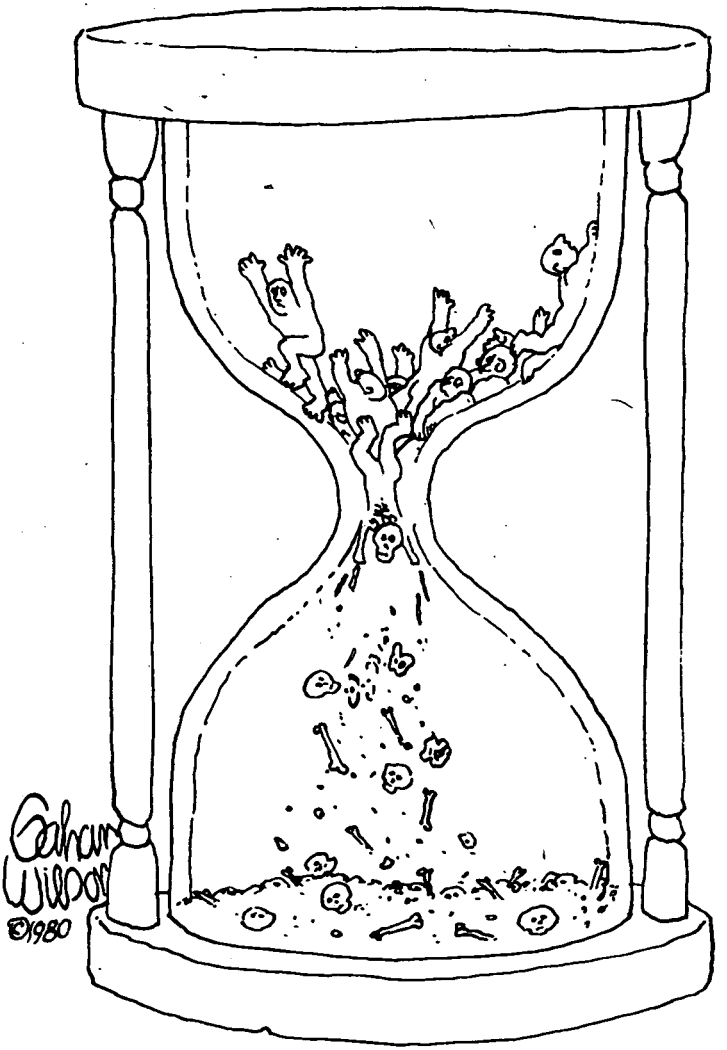

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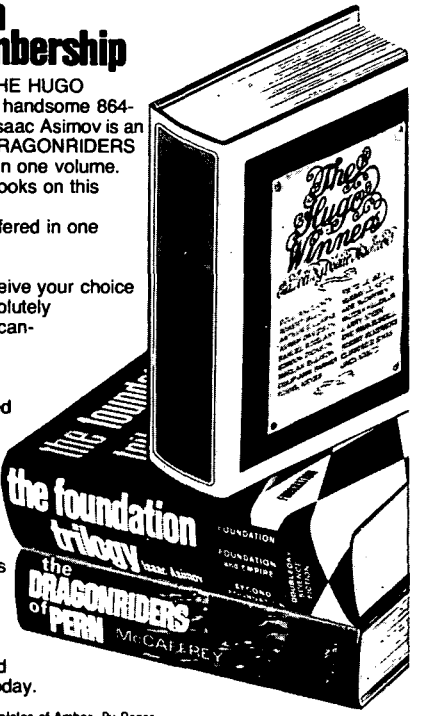

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